Like a Room Without a Roof

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Like a Room Without a Roof

by halotolerant

Summary

Will is an awkward, single Submissive who has to get a temporary partner so he can pass an Alignment Health Assessment for his job. Hannibal is a Dom agreeable to low-level ‘sessions’ in which no sex or feelings will get involved.

None of that works out quite to plan.

Notes

Additional Warnings/Content Notes: This story is set in an alternate universe where people are defined by 'alignment' to Sub or Dom. Just as with gender roles and very existence of those roles in our world, this means prejudice, discrimination and poor behaviour at times, and aspects similar to sexism, cis-sexism, transphobia and homophobia. In this world people are not always safe, sane or entirely consensual

There is sub-drop and poor aftercare in this story. This story contains sexual harassment, and a situation where a character tries to manipulate another into sex via their power imbalance and leaves the other feeling pressured to do so.

There is no cannibalism or murder in this fic, whether that is a warning or reassurance is up to you *g*

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Notes:

Many thanks to my lovely beta **elfwhistletree** <3 Thanks also due to **Draycevixen**, **wolfywriting**, **Sineala** and **Dorinda** for help with research and Ameripicking - all remaining mistakes are my own.

Edited 12/12/15 To Add: AWESOME & BEAUTIFUL artwork by **norfolkdumpling** - I asked fora header and she gave me a rare gift *g* thank you so much honey <3<3<3

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Header by Norfolkdumpling

“Listen Will, it’s not a question of *if* you find a Dom, it’s a question of *when*.”

Professor Jack Crawford sighed heavily and closed the file that rested on the desk in front of him.

“They’re not asking for a marriage certificate here,” he continued, “just evidence that you are in contact with at least a part-time partner. The usual recommendation is for sessions once a month at minimum, but if you can stand something more frequent I’d highly advise it. There’s just time, if you start now, to get a decent paper trail in place before your alignment health assessment for the job.”

Will closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep, steadying breath before answering. Yelling now would not help his case.

When he spoke, he tried to keep his voice level. He was aware that one of his eyelids kept twitching, but he didn’t think it would be too obvious to anyone else. That said, Jack hadn’t become the University of Langley’s Head of Psychiatry and Psychology without having some ability to analyze people.

“I’ve been doing just fine without sessions for almost eight years,” Will said. “The latest W.H.O. guidance, which the Chief Medical Officer endorses, recognized that some individuals, even with high index test scores, don’t require partnered activities to maintain healthy functioning.”

Jack frowned. “And so you’d describe you’d current state as ‘healthy functioning’ would you?”

“It’s just a little insomnia, it’s not a problem.”

“You’ve been late to teaching your morning classes twice this week alone, more than ten times in the last month. You look like shit. No health assessment panel, even one enlightened enough to say a 0.7 aligned Sub could theoretically be OK solo, is going to pass you as ‘functioning’, and you know it.”

“Well thanks, Jack, that is just what I need to hear before applying for Associate Professor!”

Will threw up his hands. His back had been sore for a while and now his muscles caught as he moved – he was spending too much time hunched over his desk, he knew that, it wasn’t like it was an uncommon problem. “Why are you even encouraging me to apply for the promotion if that’s what you think of me?”

“Will, as your colleague, as your boss, as far as I’m concerned if you’re doing your job then your private life is none of my business. When Proposition 34 was being debated in ‘95 I voted in favor of repealing the alignment health assessment laws, just so you know.” Jack sat back in his chair and sighed, rubbing his forehead. “But they’re still with us, and the reality is that if you want to stand a hope in hell of getting that promotion from Assistant to Associate Professor, you’re going to need to pass a health board as well as impress in all the other ways that I know you can. And if you can’t even get through a basic physical, a board is never going to sign you off as a single Submissive. Would it be so hard to get spanked once every four weeks so you can get a pay rise and tenure?”

Will leant his head back, sliding down into the chair with his chin against his chest as he did so, in order that it wouldn’t look like he was baring his throat. Not that appearing to do so to another Sub like Jack would really matter, but Jack probably believed him capable of just

about anything right now and adding what might seem like bizarre, kinky, semi-illegal flirting wouldn't help.

"Now, for example" Jack continued, apparently feeling he'd carried his point, "have you and Alana ever…?"

"No!" Will looked up at once. "No. She is not… That's not… No, it'd have to be from outside the university - no staff, no one I work with."

If he was going to be looked at in that way, if his attempts at submission were to be seen, let it be by someone never crossed paths with otherwise.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I thought." Jack reached across his desk and picked up a slim black plastic folder, stamped with the official logo of *Federal Alignment Matching*. "This guy did supervise Alana at one point during her training – she was the one who suggested I look in the matching database for him and see if he was available - but otherwise he's unconnected to the university, and Alana assures me he's a very… detached individual who is quite comfortable taking on Subs for temporary or intermittent sessions such as you need. And that's hard to find, as I'm sure you know."

"You've already planned who you want me to bend over for?" Will curled his lip. "Nice."

"Just look at the damn profile," Jack said wearily, thrusting the folder in Will's direction. "If you can find me one legitimate reason to reject this person we can go looking for another, but otherwise we're going to sit here and book you in with him on my computer right now."

Will waited, putting a hand to his head and smoothing over the pressure points at his temples, which as usual were tightening down like rusty screws. "You can't just make me…"

"No, I can't." Jack's voice dropped a little, softer now. "I can't make you look after yourself in any way at all. But will you give this a shot? Quite aside from your career, don't you think you owe yourself a chance to try and see if this makes you feel better?"

“I don’t need a Dom.”

“You don’t want a collar and a house in the suburbs and a picket fence and kids, sure, I get that - I respect it. You don’t want to feel you belong to someone or need to have someone belong to you – that’s fine. But all this would be is letting your instincts get a little breathing space every now and again, no strings attached. And we all need that. That’s why the matching program even exists.”

Will stared at him a moment longer. Jack was a good boss in many ways, but he tended to have several agendas running at any one time. If Jack wanted Will to pass the evaluations so badly as to stir up the hornet’s nest of Will’s personal life, it must mean there was another candidate for Associate Professor on hand, one who would upset Jack’s power balance in the faculty - probably some protégé of Chilton’s.

Someone like that getting promoted wouldn’t bode well for Will either. In fact it would probably make things even harder for him than it would for Jack, besides the fact that if he lost this shot at tenure, total unemployment could follow hard on its heels.

And it made sense for Jack to want another Sub in a high position in the Institute’s faculty. The man would never be idiot enough to say it aloud, even if no one else was listening, but he would know that it would help them both, and those who might come after them.

Without enthusiasm, Will reached out to take the folder. He kept his eyes off Jack now, and whatever his smug expression might be, and looked instead at the profile that had been printed off for him.

‘*Hannibal Lecter’*, this no-strings Dom was called. Well that was fairly bizarre to begin with. Originally from Lithuania, in the US since the 1990s, now resident in Baltimore, a surgeon by profession, specializing in oncology, and listing under ‘hobbies’ *Singspiele, European travel and ‘the culinary arts’*, whatever the heck that meant.

Will had been braced for Jack offering him the most clichéd ‘desirable Dom’ imaginable – some sort of milk-fed jock ideal with an investment fund and nothing to say. This was a step above that, at the very least.

But he was still uneasy. Being matched up had never gone well for him.

He'd been assigned-Sub after his alignment testing at high school, and like most of the other kids – following encouragement from the teachers – had registered for the Federal Alignment Matching database at once. He'd been fixed up with Sally Keene, a girl from another school close by, which was the pretty standard outcome. He'd wanted it to work – to be the great, supportive partner his parents had so singularly failed at being for each other – but she'd got more and more frustrated at her inability to get him to drop. Sure, at first they'd just been kids, just experimenting – no one really expected or wanted eighteen year olds to be hitting subspace – but as time passed he'd grown more and more conscious that she needed something from him that he couldn't give.

He'd tried faking dropping down, and that had worked until he'd been startled one day by the phone ringing and she'd figured him out, and got even more upset. They'd broken up soon after.

There'd been a lot of ink spilt in the decades since he'd graduated high school about the advisability of matching up teenagers that way – certainly of pushing them into it – and questions raised about whether a service that seemed to offer overwhelmingly monoracial and heterosexual matches was really just acting on strict alignment compatibility metrics alone. The matching service had been reorganized more than once in that time, and several new matching czars found. Will still had his doubts about it.

But it remained difficult to get anything like decent health insurance unless you were married or could prove you were registered with Federal Matching, and so he, like most people, didn't have much choice. Will hadn't done more to his own profile than fill in and return the mandatory annual update since he and Sally had split, but he'd still got another match sent to him a couple of years later. At the time he'd been doing his PhD at Langley, working as a TA and so busy that he'd carried on as he had during his undergrad days and simply gone to the communal student sessions campus welfare organized, gatherings where unattached Doms and Subs could meet on a one-off basis to get what they needed around their various schedules. That had worked well enough – he still hadn't ever really gone below the edges of subspace, but it kept him calm and eased his sexual frustration, and he'd never felt a lack of companionship the rest of the time.

And then Melissa's profile had arrived in his mail, and they'd met, and he'd ended up being with her for nearly two years. They'd been talking about getting a place together, even very tentatively about a collaring, maybe, one day. She'd tested out as a Dom but only with -0.2 intensity, and that had turned out to suit him pretty well. She didn't mind keeping Will

marked up for form's sake and she was as keen as the next Dom on cuffing him to the bed and getting on top, but she didn't always need to play and she certainly didn't seem to want to spend vast amounts of time or effort chasing something that Will was starting to believe probably didn't even really exist. They made each other orgasm efficiently and often, and that had seemed like it was good, like it was sufficient for a happily ever after.

Then Melissa had met Georgia at a party, and Georgia had apparently just gone on her knees right there on someone else's living room carpet like she couldn't stop herself, apologizing the whole time, and – as Melissa had explained when, crying a little, she picked up a box of her stuff from Will's house – neither of them had planned it to go further, they'd just clicked, like every time they were together they were in sync, and it was *amazing, Will, amazing, I really hope you get that someday, I really do, I'm sorry.*

Will had gone some months without a Dom, after that. And then some months became some more months, and then some years, and soon he was wondering why it was even worth the effort to go to communal meet-ups. Why should he waste his time and effort just to find some person he'd probably have nothing to say to and get a spanking? He had work to occupy him, his dogs for companionship and the peace he'd found since being single again was precious. No Dom had ever done anything so wonderful for him, and he wasn't in his twenties any more, sex with another person didn't seem like a necessary condition for survival.

And OK, maybe he hadn't been feeling his best lately, but that was the workload – the Associate Professorship application – and Chilton breathing down his neck about the Nurizon paper review, and trying to deal with students who were too exhausted from working three jobs to turn in decent papers and…

"Not everyone can be like you and Bella, you know?" Will heard himself saying. "You found the perfect Dom and you love her, and I'm happy for you, but not everyone gets that. Not everyone can get that and I can't… you can't just…"

He stopped. A pained look had passed over Jack's face.

Will tilted his head to one side, waiting. He'd not noticed anything different about Jack's behavior lately that he could think of, but then it would probably be fair to say that he hadn't been as attentive or as focused as he could have been, recently. The insomnia was really not such a big deal, it would get better by itself after a while probably, but he would admit it had left him not at his sharpest.

“Jack?” he prompted.

Jack drew a sharp breath in. “Bella’s been diagnosed with lung cancer. ‘Small cell’, apparently, which they tell me is the kind of lung cancer to have if you’re having it, but…” he trailed off, his attempt at a smile fading, his hands dropping into his lap. “She’s not really feeling it yet, but she’s… Well, you know Bella. She’s not the kind of Dom to relish the idea of her Sub looking after her that way, even if it’s just for a while, even if she needs it to get better.” Jack sighed again and looked up, meeting Will’s gaze head on. “So for fuck’s sake, Will, let me try and look after you a little, OK?”

Will bit his lip. “Yeah. Yeah, OK. Um.” He pushed his glasses up his nose and lifted up the folder with the Dom’s profile. “Let’s book an appointment, then, like you said.”

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Will woke up from his dream panting and startled, sitting up in his bed, staring into the dark.

Frantically he scrabbled at his neck but the marks had come in the dream, only in the dream – the skin was intact, and didn’t ache any more than usual when he pressed at it.

He was sweating, his t-shirt and sleep-shorts clinging to him, to his straining erection, his indisputable need for *something*, for a something that seconds earlier in his dream had seemed so clear, and so close, so desperately close…

Lying back down, Will closed his eyes again, seeking vainly into the dark for inspiration. His hand went to his groin; he cupped his dick, hissed through his teeth. It had been quite a while since he’d thought to touch himself and his skin was sensation-starved and too easily stimulated.

So many nights of poor sleep, and now when he had succeeded he’d woken in a panic with an urge he’d thought he’d all but forgotten. That illustrated the state of his existence fairly well all round.

Will tried thinking about Melissa, or one of his other past Doms. Threading one hand into his own hair, he tugged at it, hard, and bared his throat to the empty air, trying to picture someone standing over his bed ready to accept his submission, ready to…

It didn't work. It never really had, he'd never quite been able to figure out what he wanted to imagine, and wasn't that pathetic? Who on Earth couldn't even figure out what to fantasize about in private? He fairly shook with frustration as his hips rose up off the bed, seeking something that wasn't to be found.

Would that something be found in the form of Hannibal Lecter? Will wondered what the man looked like – rules to do with discrimination and equal opportunities, and avoidance of obscenity prohibited profiles on Federal Alignment Matching from carrying photographs, and of course Jack had printed out the official and approved profile rather than anything in private circulation.

Still groggy with interrupted sleep, Will reached out to the floor by his bed and located his laptop. Dragging it up onto the mattress and booting it up, he opened his internet browser and searched for *'Hannibal Lecter Dom Profile'*, expecting to instantly get hits on the usual round of social media sites. Official guidelines were one thing, but nowadays everyone had an online bio to find matches their own way.

For Dr Lecter, however, there was nothing of the kind. *Old fashioned or just dull?* Will wondered, and scrolled down past a few sites that seemed to be something to do with some kind of castle in Lithuania – Lecter was probably a common name there – and then saw a hit for a page relating to chamber music recitals in Baltimore.

For a moment, Will let the cursor hover over the link. It seemed a bit unfair, in some ways, to look the guy up ahead of meeting him.

It wasn't, after all, like Will shared himself in any way on line for reciprocal research.

As he was wrestling with his social mores, a gentle 'ping' informed him that he had a new email waiting, and he clicked on the relevant icon.

It had been forwarded from the Federal Matching website messaging system:

*Request for Contact with**: Hannibal Lecter.***

*Thank you for your request via Federal Alignment Matching. You have requested further contact information from **Hannibal Lecter**. Their greeting to you is:*

If you wish to pursue this interaction you will present yourself to my office at 134 Hulton Street, Baltimore at 19.15 precisely on September 29th. You will be wearing smart casual clothing. This interview does not guarantee that your request for partnering will be accepted or that further contact will occur. This interview will last approximately an hour.

So much for friendly greeting - it wasn't exactly exciting or provocative, such a clinical list of demands. The guy could try to sound even a little enthusiastic. And meeting at his office? What was that about? You just didn't have first meetings for matches at workplaces, not unless you had some supermassive ego about the job you did. But then the man was a surgeon, and they could probably be pretty self-obsessed.

Lecter's alignment test score hadn't been on his profile, and if he wasn't offering it now either then maybe he didn't intend to share it at all. Possibly, coming from outside of the USA, he didn't even have a score on the one-to-one index, which ranked from highest intensity Sub at 1 to highest intensity Dom at -1, reflecting the system's history as a means of measuring levels of submissiveness prior to marriage, just some good old fashioned 1920s eugenics.

But then if he worked and got insured in America, Lecter must have had to be scored. So maybe keeping it quiet said something, like that it was embarrassingly close to balanced, to null alignment – one day people were going to stop caring about that, but not yet, and certainly not for people who wanted to get ahead in a prestige job like oncological surgery – or that it was so close to a round -1.0 that it might actually scare prospective partners off.

Will sighed.

And Dr Lecter wanted him on the 29th? That was the day after… was in fact *tomorrow*, now, since they were past midnight.

It would be easy enough to come up with an excuse under the circumstances – one even Jack would have to swallow. Pressure of workload, unexpected student seminar to cover, dentist appointment too late in the day to cancel… Will could even email Professor Chilton and say he was suddenly available to talk about the Nurizon peer review, and then cite that.

Problem was, of course, getting on with the Nurizon review was about the last thing he wanted to face doing. Even less appealing than this stupid match meet-up.

Irritated, Will checked the box that would send the Dom an automated response to acknowledge that Will had received and read his message. That option existed for the kind of Subs that didn't feel comfortable addressing a Dom directly until they knew their exact preferred title(s). Traditional, missivine Subs, and fuck if Will was that, but at least it saved him having string together full sentences. If doing so confused Dr. Lecter about who and what he was, then so much the better.

And if forewarned was forearmed, then Will was going to go in with every advantage he could get.

Closing his email, Will brought his search page back up and clicked the link to 'Baltimore Chamber Music Society'.

And there Hannibal was.

A bad photo, generally speaking – too much flash, a poor angle, the subjects not yet ready as they clustered together with their wineglasses like alarmed nocturnals at a watering hole.

But *Dr H. Lecter, Baltimore Methodist Hospital* – as the caption read – looked more composed than most.

‘Angular’ was the first word that came to Will’s mind to describe him. High, sharp cheekbones and deep-set eyes, salt-and-pepper hair and a very slight curl to his full lips, though you couldn’t tell if he was annoyed at being photographed or about to smile into the camera.

Will blinked at the screen, at the little glow in the darkness of his room, which illuminated the mess of his bed like a raft in a black sea. The stress of the last few minutes had effectively diminished his arousal, and if he’d wondered if the sight of his new prospective Dom might suddenly or wonderfully engage him, that certainly wasn’t the case.

And that was a good thing. It would help make their mandatory sessions – if they ever got to them, if Will was deemed to pass muster – simple and straightforward, without the complication of attraction.

Some fucking small comfort; Will was shaping up to feeling pretty badly disposed towards Dr H. Lecter, and his demands, and his chamber music, altogether. And he bet Dr H. Lecter wouldn’t be that much keener on him, and his background and his awkwardness and his lack of readiness to take any dominine shit.

If Will felt no sexual attraction, for example, then he wasn’t about to consent to sex. It wasn’t a Dom’s intrinsic right in a power exchange session, and even if some people still believed otherwise the law hadn’t supported them for fifty years.

Since the mid-Eighties the Federal Matching service had specifically disclaimed any implication that being matched by them had anything to do with sex. Nowadays, sleeping with the same person who you had sessions with, whilst the common arrangement, was no longer seen as necessarily progressing from it. That said, most people who wanted to play wanted sex to be an option open to them, and if this Dom was like that, and Will’s lack of interest made him keen to jettison Will as soon as possible, that would be fine by Will.

Will closed the laptop and lay back onto his pillow once more. He closed his eyes, and waited to see if sleep would come.

It seemed like he’d be waiting a while.

After twenty minutes had passed on his digital clock, he gave up, got out of bed and made an instant coffee, and sat down to stare at his stack of marking instead.

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134 Hulton Street, Baltimore, when Will arrived there the next evening, turned out to be an imposing Second Empire style building, now occupied by *Dr H. Lecter, oncology*, on the ground floor and – according to the cards by the doorbells – some blank entity in a separate residence above.

Will put his finger to the lower of the bells, and paused, rubbing one foot up the back of his other calf like he was a second grader called to the principal's office. Of all the bullshit that went with being a Sub, this was one part he resented a lot – that meetings between Doms and Subs still generally went along the lines of Doms as some sort of buyers – discerning, picky, always to be considered right in their opinions – and Subs as merchandise – to be assessed, to be chosen, to be passive. To regard not being chosen as a personal failure and make attempts to change in light of it.

Maybe society was better for Subs than it had been a hundred years ago, but it still stank. So they'd done away with mandatory testing in most countries, so what? That was a technicality – almost everywhere it still happened under one excuse or another, or life became very difficult.

Will repeated these familiar lines of argument to himself, trying to find distraction from the consciousness of how little his clothes fit the specification given in the Dom's contact email. These were his best jeans, after all, which made them the best trousers he owned, and he had ironed his shirt after pulling it out of the laundry basket when he'd not been able to find another in his rush between leaving work, dashing back to his house to change and then driving here. Wearing his one – cheap, ill-fitting – suit that he rolled out for obligatory work dinners and family weddings, picked out by his stepmother and with cuffs he'd carefully frayed when trying not to scream at his relatives, had been out of the question. He'd not be in the mood for anything but confrontation in that.

Whilst dressing at home, straying from the brief had seemed like no big deal. Here, and about to step over a Dom's threshold, he couldn't help thinking what the consequences of his choices might be.

He'd woken again the night before, sweating and shaking, from a vision of being put over the lap of someone with a face he couldn't see. The image – the feeling - kept coming back round in his mind, and making him shiver.

Will looked at his watch, and when the display ticked over to *19h:14m:30s*, he made himself ring the doorbell.

If he could be nothing else, he'd at least on this occasion scraped into achieving 'punctual'.

He pressed the bell, and heard a genuine chime inside, like there was actually, literally,a bell in the house rather than some electronic set-up.

During the waiting that followed, he thought about running away. But that would be pathetic, really. And it wouldn't stop Jack hounding him, or the application process for the Associate Professorship asking for the results of his alignment health assessment.

Will closed his eyes and groaned.

"Is it really so bad?" a voice asked.

Accented.

Angular.

Will's head shot up. He grimaced and felt his face heat.

There was the Dom, in the doorway. Dr H. Lecter, staring down at him with a cool gaze.

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“We will proceed to my office. Please take a seat when you get there.” Dr Lecter indicated an open door down the hall.

Chairs lined the corridor nearer the door – a waiting area, Will realized. The main office, when he came to it, was a large room with the feel of a library in a private home – and a private stately home at that. A fine antique desk stood to one side, facing a fireplace the other end of the room in which a small blaze crackled cheerfully. In the middle of the room were two chairs - low slung, all black leather and smooth chrome - facing each other.

“Is this where you see your patients?” Will asked, looking round.

“Outpatients,” Dr Lecter said, and gestured again at one of the chairs. “Yes. I find those who have spent - or are going to spend - a long time in hospital, don’t much relish returning to such a building unless they have to. I have clinics at the hospital too, of course, but when I can, I see patients here.”

“And prospective Subs,” Will pointed out.

Dr Lecter did not flinch at the accusation. He kept a steady stare in Will’s direction.

“I asked to meet you here,” he said calmly, “because I thought you might find it easier than coming to such a proprietorial space as my house. You may say that somewhere public would have been more neutral still, but I’m afraid I cannot countenance my personal life being conducted in public. Indeed I do not generally go out in public with those Subs I am connected to. You should know that.”

Will inclined his head, accepting the explanation. He had not expected any degree of thoughtfulness, and now he felt wrong-footed, no longer certain what to expect.

“I can see from the profile you sent me, Will – may I call you Will?”

Will nodded, surprised again by the courtesy – it was not for Subs to choose titles. This encounter was veering rapidly away from the script he'd envisioned in his head.

"I can see from your profile that you have not had a session with a Dom in a very long time. May I ask why?"

"Why does anyone do anything?"

Will knew he was being rude, but his heart was racing now, beating solid in the pulse points under his jaw; his mouth was dry, he didn't know what to do with his hands. It had been so, so long since he'd been stared at by a Dom with intentions. He'd forgotten that it could feel like this – could hardly believe it ever had.

"That is a good question," Dr Lecter said mildly. "Though I'm not sure it is an answer." His voice was calm and certain and steady – Will could it feel it rolling round him like a softly incoming tide.

Will shook himself, and gripped onto the arms of his chair. He felt himself scratching and picking at the stitching on the arms, working blunt, bitten nails rough against the soft, buttery leather.

Maybe that would make this man Dr Lecter forgo the pleasantries and rush at him, push him down on to the floor, twist his arm behind his back and try to make him…

"Listen, Dr Lecter," Will said, and did not ask if that was the title he was intended to use or not. "Let's get one thing clear. I'm here because I need someone to partner me for sessions at the minimum possible frequency to pass an Alignment Health Assessment for my job. I don't want you in my head or in my pants. I don't want helping or fixing, or to be changed. I just need something we can call a session maybe one hour a month, and a stamp on my record to say I got it."

"And you are hoping an outburst such as this will provoke such a thing, perhaps?"

Will looked him dead in the eye, too cross to care how it made his skin itch to do so. Dr Lecter was smooth and sleek and untroubled as a cat, and Will's head was coming unscrewed with how that was making him feel.

"No, I'm just telling you the truth. I don't play games. I don't really go in for the social niceties." Will smiled through his teeth for a second, full and fake. "And that, by the way, is one reason I haven't tended to get on with the Doms I've been set up with in the past – they don't like Subs like me, with opinions, with minds. I say what I think and if you try to punish me simply for speaking aloud, for anything I do outside the sessions we negotiate, I'll leave now. Nobody owns me."

Dr Lecter sat back in his chair. He was, to Will's complete surprise, reining back his body language, making nothing aggressive except that fixed stare, and without that he'd scarcely be a Dom.

"If other Doms have these faults, have treated you so badly," Dr Lecter said. "Do I deserve your vitriol against them?"

No anger. No outrage. No offended pride. It was like throwing a lighted match at gasoline, only to find it was cold water.

Will slumped, chin going automatically to his chest. "No. I suppose not."

There were a few minutes of silence. Will wondered if his breathing sounded as heavy to another person.

"You are very tense about this meeting," Dr Lecter observed.

"Wow. I can tell you have a medical degree." Will ducked his head again as soon as he'd spoken. "I'm sorry. You're not trying to be a dick and I am, but… yeah. More than tense. I've got… a lot going on and I don't need this right now."

“Your boss Professor Crawford seems to think this is exactly what you need right now. Yes, he telephoned me - yesterday in fact.”

“He what?” Will’s anger flared now. “He had no right! He should have…”

“He should have told you, yes. He should, in fact, have *asked* you, but it is done, and I am telling you about it now, as I told him I would. And I’ll tell you what he told me.

“He told me that you are brilliant. A gifted thinker, a great asset to his institute, likely to contribute in no small way to the sum benefit of mankind in your career. And he told me that you are unraveling, Will. That he worries about you, that your Alignment Assessment will never be passed under current circumstances, and that you rejected out of hand all three Doms he tried to set you up on dates with – I assume for the reasons you have been outlining - so now here you and I are, somewhat of a last resort. Does that sound accurate to you?”

Will thought back through his day. The orange-flavored, cereal-enriched milk drink he’d chugged down in his car instead of the breakfast he’d yet again not had time for. The piles of dog food never cleared up, but insurance against him getting stuck somewhere and missing a feed altogether. The lack of shirts, t-shirts or any kind of acceptable clothing clean in his house, and the fact that he kept the Febreze in his bedroom now. The awful cafeteria lunches with sandwiches of shredded cheese mulched with what was hopefully mayonnaise, because he never, ever got round to preparing any meals in advance.

The insomnia. And when that wasn’t around, the dreams.

“I’m prepared to try and see if having sessions with a Dom will give me some sort of benefit,” Will said slowly. “And if does help, great, fine. But that’s all I want – the minimum. Like physiotherapy, or piano lessons.”

“Excellent. We are agreed, then.” Dr Lecter sat back once more in his chair, smiling serenely, and picked an invisible piece of lint from his trouser leg.

Will blinked at him.

“I also do not wish for an involved relationship,” Dr Lecter said smoothly. “Or for intrusion into my more personal space. I must admit some relief, actually, in finally finding a prospective session-partner with similar goals – I too need to pass certain assessments for my work. We will do enough to tick our boxes, so to speak, and hopefully not inconvenience each other too much along the way.”

“Oh. Great.”

Of basically all the things that had been said in all the imaginary ways this had played out in Will’s head, that wasn’t one of them.

A Dom who barely wanted him. That should be ideal.

He sighed, gave himself a little shake, and felt a part of him relax down a little. “Great,” he repeated, and started to let himself believe it. “That’s good.”

“I own the upper floor of this building, as well as this office space,” Dr Lecter continued. “It is a self-contained flat and generally I let it out, but it is empty at present, and may suit our purpose admirably – a neutral space, but private and well enough appointed. I am not fond of hotels.”

Will realized a response was awaited, and nodded, still somewhat bemused.

“I do have…” Dr Lecter paused, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips. Maybe they got a little fuller, a little redder - Will was determined to keep his head up but unequal to actually holding the other man’s gaze, and he had to look at something.

“You should know, Will, that I like to have my life in a certain amount of order.”

“Yes, I, uh, guessed that,” Will said, looking around the pristinely perfect office they were sitting in.

“I do have preferences for how you would behave in session. Addressing me as ‘Hannibal’, to start with.”

Will felt himself blush a bit. It had been rude not to ask in the first place. Dr Lecter really wasn’t trying to make this hard.

“And I would like to dress you in clothes I will supply. I have an acute sense of smell and the laundry detergents of others irritate me, and often have certain Proustian associations…” he waved a hand.

If Dr Lecter’s sense of smell was that good, he was well aware that detergent hadn’t been near Will’s shirt in a while. Will was all too glad to nod his head.

“Do you have any such parameters for me, Will? In general, I mean. I have your approved and non-approved activities list from your web application, of course and we can discuss technicalities later.”

Will shrugged. “You know I don’t want more than minimum discipline. I don’t care how you dress. You can call me Will, or whatever other term floats your boat if it isn’t outright derogatory. I… I don’t know.” He shrugged again. “I’ve not…”

He’d not had enough experience to come up with much of a list, only to know a great deal of things that had failed to work for him – that was what he meant.

He didn’t finish the sentence, but he had a feeling Dr Lecter – *Hannibal*, such a strange name - would figure out his secrets anyway, if not now then when they had actually gotten started, and Will’s inadequacies became more evident.

“Shall I show you the apartment now, then? It will help you know what to expect, if you would prefer that to be the case before our first proper session. If we are agreed?”

“You don’t mind?” Will swallowed. He’d not imagine it would be an option. “Um. Sure. Great. And yes, agreed. This seems… as much as one could hope for.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrow a moment, as if – accurately enough – not feeling certain he’d heard a compliment.

But he got up and – holding doors open for Will as he went - lead the way back through to the hallway, outside and then round to a second front door, concealed around the side of the building. That opened onto a miniscule hall space from which rose a flight of stairs, simply carpeted in something thin and grey, the walls white and without decoration. Up the stairs was another door, and then the flat, equally impersonal, all of it white gloss and matte magnolia, generic framed black and white photographs and unobtrusive light fixtures.

“The rental market is easier without too much… personality,” Hannibal explained, having clearly read Will’s expression too well. “Tenants change things, but it has to be returned to this state at the end of the contract. I let it unfurnished, so there is not much here, but I will see that we have all we need here for our next meeting. There is hot water and so forth – you will be able to shower here, I will provide a towel.”

Shower, because he might need to shower after the activities of their session, Will thought, and tried to suppress a little quiver that ran through him with the thought. He’d almost forgotten that that was what this was all about, with Hannibal being so brisk and businesslike, more like he was selling the place to Will than suggesting they undertake primal acts of power exchange within it.

“As you can see, there’s a functioning kitchen,” Hannibal was continuing, opening doors off the central corridor. “Living room,” he indicated an entirely empty space, “bedroom with en-suite and then another bathroom. There’s a second bedroom also, but as you can see the space in that is sadly restricted, I think some tenants use it simply to dry their laundry.”

Will, slightly overwhelmed, folded his arms and tried to come up with a response. “And, um, which room were you imagining us using for, um…?”

Hannibal looked as if he was surprised it was even a question. “In the living room, was my thought.”

Will flushed. He hadn’t at all meant to imply that they would use a bedroom together – even if such a suggestion was less loaded when the room in question was empty and had only the name. It had been conversation for conversation’s sake. That said, why shouldn’t he ask that question? For all he knew Hannibal liked administering his spankings over the toilet or even whilst…

“About that hard limits list,” Will said.

“Indeed.” Hannibal gave a small nod. “It must be attended to. But first, if I may, there is something I would like to ask to do with you on this occasion.”

“Yeah?” Will licked his dry lips, finding the metallic, bloody taste of the split in the bottom one from where he’d chewed too often and too hard. Hannibal had been pretty reasonable so far, Will would admit, and if he really wanted to put Will over his knee tonight, then Will figured he could put up with it.

Hannibal cleared his throat. “Let me give you a meal?”

And although Will was still suspecting some sort of double entendre right up until the point where Hannibal took his cleared bowl of chocolate mousse away and handed him a coffee, that was what happened. Hannibal went out down the road to the nearest bodega, came back twenty minutes later with two bulging bags and proceeded to prepare a Spanish omelette that made Will want to moan with delight, some fried mushrooms on toast dripping with olive oil and splendid with garlic, and then the aforementioned mousse, conjured somehow from block chocolate and two eggs, all in the unprepossessing surrounds of the rental flat’s kitchen.

‘There,” Hannibal said, with something that sounded almost like pride, as Will sat back and drank the coffee (made in a French press Hannibal fetched up from his office, and Will had always supposed that there wouldn’t be a difference but he could taste it, easily). “You needed feeding, I think.”

Will only shrugged, but couldn't help appreciating the benign indolence of feeling really full, and on food that tasted good and had been a genuine pleasure to eat.

"Thanks," he said, and took another sip of coffee, then put the cup down and tried to rally himself to something a bit better. "That was… very good."

Hannibal's grin widened. "Excellent. I think many of our sessions should follow this mold, perhaps?"

Will frowned. "But this isn't… Would this begin to qualify? Would you call this being a Dom and Sub? Surrendering to our instincts or whatever the hell it's supposed to do for us?"

"I want to give you what you need, and you needed this. I confess I had no plans to cook for my prospective submissive partner – I would have brought in better ingredients if so – but it is a thing I often do for acquaintances. And I enjoyed it." Hannibal shrugged, and got up from the table, taking both their cups over to the sink. His face was perfectly composed, but Will wondered if that hadn't been almost a flash of hurt.

"No, I didn't mean…" Will got up; found himself going over to Hannibal's side. "It was really nice. I liked it. I just… I thought I was supposed to be the one doing things for you?"

"It would appear that this was something for me," Hannibal said firmly, and starting to run the hot water.

"Well, I'm glad." Will went and rummaged in the grocery bags for the dishcloth he'd seen whilst helping unpack earlier, and went to stand by the sink, ready to take the cleaned dishes for drying.

He really was glad, he found. Standing there, food in his belly, so much less worried about entering a session partnership than he had even hours before, he felt about as good as he had in a while.

“If you want to cook for me again, I’d love that,” he said, slowly. “But we can do… more. I know you’ll have seen from when we went over the list just now that I don’t have the longest approved kinks list, but you know, within that… It’s OK.”

Hannibal didn’t say anything at first, but his movements over the sink had paused. “OK,” he said, finally, and gave Will a slight smile.

“Not that…” Will bit his lip, suddenly afraid again. “Not that I would tell you what to do, or, I just thought that you might think that I didn’t, that I wouldn’t… you’ve been trying your best with me and…”

“Will,” Hannibal said, and put out his hand, slowly and deliberately, so that the wet, sudsy fingers encircled Will’s wrist, very lightly.

Will drew in a sharp breath. It was like the first hit of caffeine to the bloodstream, of chocolate to the tongue.

“Will. We shall work this out, between us. It is only such simple courtesies that we wish from each other.”

And Hannibal took his hand away again.

“Now,” he said, “shall I put some leftovers in a box for you to take home?”

- - -

Two

Despite his best intentions, Will was nearly an hour late for his next appointment with Hannibal.

This appointment they had decided to schedule for two weeks after their first meeting, on another Friday night.

“Not even waiting a month, it must have gone well,” Jack had said, grinning, when Will had told him about it – Jack having on the Monday morning following the first time cornered Will in a corridor at the university to perform his interrogation.

Will had reminded himself that Jack wasn’t having the easiest time, and so had refrained from commenting on Jack having talked to Hannibal behind Will’s back, and had shared more than he would have done otherwise, which was to say he’d shared anything at all.

“You look better already,” Jack had told him, which was clearly just wishful thinking because you couldn’t change in appearance that much in a few days, even if you were sleeping a little better, (maybe), and were still benefiting from easily-rewarmed boxes of pre-prepared home cooking.

Then Jack had moved to the subject of the Nurizon review, and Will had felt his best intentions towards the man decidedly cooling.

“Chilton tells me the results in that paper are really very promising,” Jack said. “They can’t wait to press on to the next stage and get production of the drug going, or so he tells me. So what’s holding you up from giving it your seal of approval in your review?”

“It’s just… I need some clarification on some data. I didn’t quite follow their write-up process. I need to talk to Chilton first. That’s all.”

“OK, well, I’ll tell him you’re onto it, and you’ll get it done and with him soon. Heaven knows I don’t like dancing to the corporate tune but CETApharm are responsible for too high a percentage of our research funding to piss off accidentally. So, by next week?”

“Sure, yes,” Will said, waving his hand and escaping down the corridor.

Will could have emailed Chilton that day, or during that week with his questions about the data in the Nurizon study, but a student with a personal crisis appealed to him out of nowhere at the end of his class and he spent several days in a flurry of meetings and phone calls to try and get her the help she needed. He might find it hard to interact successfully with other people, and as a Sub be poorly positioned to make demands, but for some unknowable reason she’d appealed to him, and it wasn’t like anyone else seemed about to step in.

He’d never imagined a Dom like Madison having a breakdown, but it seemed like maybe the fact that no one expected it from her had made her situation even worse.

The next week, with Madison at least temporarily safe and sorted out, Will was once again conscious of the Nurizon folder on his desk. It was still there on Tuesday, then on Wednesday and Thursday.

On Thursday he’d thought he really would get to it, clear it from his mind before the session with Hannibal, and the weekend generally. He’d got back to his office from his last class, sat down in his chair and wondered whether to go and get a cup of coffee from the break room before he started.

And then had woken up abruptly, heart pounding, when the housekeeper crashed into the room with a vacuum cleaner and in the face of his blinking inquiries, informed him that it was nearly one a.m.

If Will had been sleeping a little better the first few nights after his trip to Baltimore, that effect had certainly worn off quickly. Getting home Thursday night – Friday morning, technically – he’d stared at himself in his bathroom mirror and figured he might even look worse than he had two weeks earlier. The back of his left eye intermittently throbbed, his eyelids twitched and he kept forgetting whether he’d taken painkillers and not daring to take more just in case.

He really wasn't in the mood for any more pain, but if Hannibal was going to spank him the next evening, he'd take it. Anything to not be in charge of what he was supposed to be doing for half an hour. Which was a missivine trait, no doubt, but one he could hardly believe everyone didn't feel from time to time.

Eventually Will had drifted into another light sleep in his own bed, whilst his mind wandered restlessly through the loosely linked images of his memory and imagination – soap bubbles on skin, hands reaching, grabbing, a clash of gazes in the fight to subdue…

Later on Friday morning – nearly ten a.m., Will having slept through his alarm – Will had raced into work from his car and flung his briefcase into his office before going to his first lecture of the day. At lunchtime he'd come back to find Professor Chilton sitting behind his desk, reading his copy of the Nurizon file.

"So this wasn't lost in the mail, then?" Chilton said, not getting up. "I was starting to think that it must have been."

"I am getting to it," Will said, wincing, and then wincing again when his stomach rumbled – he'd had to skip breakfast. "It's just. Well, I keep meaning to call you about it but I guess you're here now, so…" Will reached out and took the file from Chilton's hands, flipping to the back where he'd stowed his extra printouts. "Look at this. It's the raw data from the trial, pre-analysis. Since they ran the study through the university labs here, I was able to get hold of one of the lab assistants and he passed this on, and if you'll look…" he gestured at the print-out.

"I'm not entirely sure that's legal, Dr Graham," Chilton said sternly, interrupting him. Chilton was to all appearances a Dom – at any rate, he certainly made sure he had every appearance of it. Speaking to Will now, he'd put Command in his voice like he was on some daytime soap playing the Dom of The House cliché.

"Yes, but look," Will urged, holding up the sheet he'd highlighted the most and with the closest grouping of his annotations and notes on. "As a novel anxiolytic Nurizon does have a great side-effect profile in comparison to the market leader, but there's this group – not a huge number, but it's definitely statistically significant – in whom the drug made their existing symptoms worse and brought on new ones, and did worrying things to their liver bloods. And what they seem to have in common is that they have a past history of idiosyncratic reactions to amitriptyline – not all of them, but enough to be worth following.

But if you look at the data as it's going to be published," Will flipped back to the glossy sheaf of Nurizon's official release for his review, "then that patient group doesn't appear at all – they seem to have been labeled 'non-compliant' and simply removed before any analysis, like they weren't even trial subjects."

Chilton looked at the page for a moment, and then made a face. "I was… not aware of this technicality," he said slowly. "Let me get back to you on that."

"OK, sure." Will turned away and opened up his briefcase to find the banana he'd grabbed on his way out of his house. "Oh! But not this evening, I have to leave at half past four."

"Oh really?" Chilton raised an eyebrow. "I heard on the grapevine you'd finally got some Dom, ah, shall we say, interested in what you have to offer? You'll be changing,of course?" He looked Will up and down without apology. "Yes. Changing. You will need to leave on time. But," and he pushed Command into his voice again – Will wondered if he listened to self-help tapes about it, "I'll have to see what CETApharm say. They may want to talk to you directly."

"Well, I could phone them tomorrow myself, or…"

"You'll excuse me not necessarily believing that you'll get round to that." Chilton got his mobile out of his pocket. "Look, I'll get onto it right now. You're lecturing...?"

"Two until three."

When Will had returned to his office at 3.10pm, Chilton, Alana Bloom and a man he didn't recognize were waiting for him.

"Will," Alana said brightly, stepping forward. She wore her Dom status subtly, too subtly for some on the staff who whispered she switched as she chose. Although they weren't exactly friends, Will had always liked her.

“Will, this is Dr Hedecker from CETApharm. He wants to talk with you.”

“Yes, he wants to talk to *Will*,” Chilton said testily, under his breath.

Hedecker smiled with a lot of teeth and held out his hand, grasping Will’s with warmth and firmness, a contact Will struggled not to recoil from. Hedecker was a Sub, the brown skin of his neck artfully setting off a thin white leather collar with a single diamond at the center. Moneyand class, then. Business must be good at CETApharm.

“Dr Graham,” Hedecker said, “we at CETApharm are so excited that you will be reviewing our paper prior to publication. The opinion of someone with your prominence in the field will mean a great deal in getting our work the attention it deserves. Now,” he brought his hands together in an arch in front of his chest, smiling, “Professor Chilton has been telling me that you’re delayed by some practical concerns about the data-processing? It sounds like there must have been a slight mistake somewhere.”

“Well that’s what I thought,” Will began, opening his case to get the folder out. “Because the adverse outcome documentation in your write-up simply doesn’t cover all the subjects in your trial.” He handed the pages over.

“No, you misunderstand.” Hedecker gave a short laugh and the papers a cursory glance. “There was no subject group as you describe. Here, let me…” He brought out a gleaming iPad and began sliding rapidly through brightly colored graphs. Will cast an anxious glance at the clock, and then his eye was caught by a pie chart.

“See! There!” Will jabbed his finger at the screen, leaving a long smear. “That’s the data set. That pie chart doesn’t list ‘liver enzyme deterioration’ in the adverse outcomes at all, for a start.”

“Let me assure you, Dr Graham, if you’ll look here,” Hedecker said, and brought up another chart.

“But those aren’t the figures!” Will picked up his folder again. “This is completely different, look!”

Hedecker raised his eyebrow. “What I’m seeing here is a bunch of unattributed numbers – no heading, no sign-off, not even full descriptions – in a generic spreadsheet that could have come from anywhere.”

“Well, yes, that’s the raw data as it was originally gathered.”

“I don’t know who told you that,” Hedecker said, and left the question mark to drop in slowly afterwards.

“Someone I believe I can trust about this.” Will told him, frowning. “Someone with no reason to lie.”

“Well, let’s not get into that.” Hedecker shook his head. His voice was earnest, dripping with sincerity. “But I can assure you that this data, this data which I have here, approved and officially passed by the project heads, is the genuine article, and not subject to anything of the manipulation you seem to fear. You can look at the original experimental journals in the labs if you don’t believe me.”

“Fine,” Will clenched his teeth in anger. “Let’s go look at them right now.”

Together they trooped over to the university’s science block and eventually found the correct labs, where Chilton and Alana helped locate the study’s logbooks. All of them tallied with Hedecker’s charts. Not a missing figure in sight.

Will sank down onto a lab stool and rubbed at his temples with his fingers. “I don’t get it.”

Alana folded her arms. “There’s certainly no verifiable alternative data. Not now.” She turned to Will with a sigh. “So any objection wouldn’t have a leg to stand on, not at the moment.”

“So we can expect your review for the journal soon, then, Dr Graham, now that that has been cleared up?” Hedecker was all teeth again.

“I’m sure you can rely on Will,” Chilton cut in before Will could speak. “I happen to know that Will is on the tenure track – a man with some great prospects. He wanted to get everything absolutely right for you, our biggest grant sponsors and we can’t fault him for his attention to detail, but he’s had all his questions answered. For now, though, we must let him go – I believe he has an appointment tonight.”

With a sensation like a bucket of cold water being poured over his back, Will came back to himself and looked at the clock.

It was half past five. He was supposed to be in Maryland in half an hour’s time and he hadn’t yet changed his clothes or brushed his teeth, and even if he set off straight away there was no way at all he’d arrive on time.

- - -

Will’s mood had not been improved by the logjam of traffic he encountered on the outskirts of Baltimore. He’d sacrificed taking a shower or eating anything in favor of trying to make up lost time on the roads, but the state of them – following a minor collision in the snow just when he was getting near – meant that it was clear he could have achieved the same arrival time by simply setting off later when the roads had got moving again, no sacrifices needed, or of any use.

Instead he was tired, he knew he stank, and his stomach was making a small, hard whine inside him. His head ached. CETApharm had pushed him into a corner and he couldn’t figure out what to do about it. Round and round in his head the argument and counter-arguments – patient safety, the needs of the many, his career, his ethics – trod a weary groove.

Jack was relying on him to get this tenure, and the security and status that went with it. He wasn’t going to get anything from the university if he alienated CETApharm. He was driving hours through the night to a session just to help him get this job; if he messed up some other way, this all became meaningless.

If he didn't write a piece for the journal approving the Nurizon paper and praising the results of the drug tests, someone else would. If he did try and publish anything against them, they'd probably sue him – it wasn't like he had any citable evidence.

Will slowly banged his head against the steering wheel. Nurizon was a product that worked, just not for certain people. CETApharm might not want to have any negative publicity, but that didn't mean they wouldn't put sufficient safety guidance in their literature down the line and adequately protect those who needed protecting.

He felt like he was losing track of which way was up. Like if he could just get centered for two minutes everything would become beautifully clear and his decisions obvious, but like he had as much chance of that as a spirit level tumbling down a cliff.

He really, *really* didn't feel like being disciplined, not in this state, but this level of tardiness was beyond ignoring – Hannibal would have no option, no Dom would.

Will could turn the car around and leave, abandon this whole undertaking, but if he didn't get his sessions it wouldn't matter what he did to CETApharm anyway, and if was going to toe their line, he had to have the sessions or it all became pointless. A Gordian knot of obligations he couldn't escape.

Too many ways he was just going to have to do as he was told.

At the door of the apartment over Hannibal's office, Will rang the bell – an electronic buzz, here – and took a moment to rest his forehead against the cool stone of the doorframe.

"If you did not wish to come, you could have contacted me," Hannibal remarked, having opened the door. His tone of voice was distinctly chilly. "Or indeed you could have contacted me in any case – I was concerned about what might be keeping you."

"Yes, yes, sure, I've been bad, fine." Will threw up his hands. "Great. Let's get to it. This day can't get any worse." His eyes were burning slightly – for no more reason than exhaustion, but it made him feel even more vulnerable, which made him even angrier at having to be there.

“I had cooked for us,” Hannibal continued, with frosty dignity “I will heat yours over whilst you shower, if you like?”

Will didn’t bother to act like that was really a question. “Sure. I need a shower before I’m ready for you - I get it. Will do.” He pushed past Hannibal to start climbing the stairs. He felt suddenly uncomfortable meeting Hannibal’s eye, not in the usual way that he could have fought past, but with something rather like guilt. And was just stupid, because no one had asked Hannibal to cook.

In the time between their last meeting and this, though, Will was prepared to admit, the Hannibal Lecter in his mind had been less and less defined by how Hannibal had actually behaved when they had been together, and more by Will’s basic sense of what a Dom – any Dom – was.

And in Will’s head it wasn’t really a definition with words. More like a sense, an awareness of a predator from the corner of the peripheral vision, intangible and yet terrifyingly present. Something that brought a rush of feeling that made his hackles rise; something that by some logic should only be fear, and which he wanted solely to be anger, and too often instead was… other things entirely.

A spirit level tumbling down a cliff, possibly whilst on fire, he thought, and gave a soft groan as he followed orders and made his way to the apartment’s ‘bedroom’, to take advantage of the en-suite.

Cleaner, if scarcely feeling improved in any other way, Will emerged after fifteen minutes or so to find that a simple outfit of t-shirt and track pants had been laid on the table that was today placed in the middle of the otherwise empty bedroom. Will’s own clothes had been taken up from the floor, folded and piled neatly next to the fresh ones, as if in reproach.

No socks or slippers, no sweater. Despite the snow on the ground outside, the apartment was heated well enough that Will wouldn’t need them. No doubt Hannibal had thought all that through, in order to get Will as a barefoot suppliant, and with minimal shielding between his body and Hannibal’s hands.

It was what any Dom might want. And not every Dom would think to turn the ambient heat up at the same time.

Will rubbed at his temples and sighed.

There had been new and expensive-looking toiletries in the shower rack – Will's skin should now smell of black pepper oil and patchouli - and fluffy towels and a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb and brush laid ready in the bathroom. The clothes set out for him, though simple, were from a high-end label, and apparently brand new, although they seemed to have been laundered once, the thick, acidic off-the-shelf smell replaced with a fresh, clean scent.

Hannibal had clearly been meticulous in his preparation for this evening's session, had made quite the effort, especially if – as Will suspected – he'd brought all the furniture up to the apartment alone.

Will dressed quickly, gave his hair another harsh rub with the towel, tried to improve the resulting appearance with the hairbrush, and then, giving it up as a bad job, went through to the kitchen-diner.

The long table there had, since their last visit, been covered by a pristine cream cloth, and had a centerpiece composed of three flawless white orchids in a cut-crystal vase, surrounded at the base by tea-lights in blue glass holders. Two places were laid, one to the side of the other rather than facing.

"Ah, there you are." Hannibal turned away from the hob, a plate in his hand. It was a pasta dish with what looked like mussels – smoked mussels, from the aroma – and specks of something green. It smelt amazing, and Will felt a sharp ache in his cheeks as his salivary glands kicked into action.

"Thank you," Will said, taking his place after Hannibal had set the dish down. Hannibal himself had taken an apple, and having sat proceeded to slice it up and bring slice and knife to his mouth. Will watched him, fascinated by the swift, certain movement of the blade. Focusing on something else, he reasoned, would help him not to just bolt down the food, as he was tempted to do.

Hannibal had long, elegant fingers, but there was rangy strength to his hands too. The hair on his arms was visible at his cuffs – he was in shirtsleeves, his jacket hung up in the hallway, perhaps removed for the purposes of cooking.

And washing up – there was a solitary dish in the drying rack, an image instantly conjuring visions of Hannibal eating alone, one eye on his phone, surrounded by his careful preparations and wondering where Will had got to, if he was even coming at all.

Will felt a stab of regret, and looked down at his lap, ducking his head. This session could have been good. He'd wanted it to be, before. He'd wanted to get this right – Hannibal had done nothing to deserve anything less from him.

Will had had a dreadful and frustrating day, but that was largely other people's faults – not Hannibal's – and also, he had to admit, at least somewhat his own.

But now he had forgotten himself, and had behaved terribly, and he was pretty sure any Dom, no matter how thoughtful, could respond in no way but punishment, and probably a punishment severe enough to be more than Will could tolerate. And, inevitably, things between them would sour.

Will finished up the last fragment of his pasta, rubbing it over the streaky yellow remains of the sauce on the plate, and then sat back in his chair, uncertain whether to say anything.

Hannibal looked up at him. "I thought, dessert later?" His voice was as courteous as ever, but he still didn't exactly look happy. "And we proceed now to the other room?"

"Sure," Will muttered. Again, Hannibal's words couldn't really be considered a question.

"Sure. OK," he said again, trying to push more Acceptance into his tone, to give Hannibal that satisfaction, at least. He would take his punishment, he decided, as best he could. He would try to stifle resentment and to be pliant and missivine as any Dom might dream of, as much as a Sub smiling their way blissfully through an advert for powder that washed so much whiter…

Will clenched his jaw, then winced, feeling it pop. He ran a hand over his face, pressing finger and thumb into the corners of his eyes in order to try and alleviate his headache a little before the new pain began. He would do this. He would get up in a minute and he would do this, get this one thing right today.

Hannibal stood up, scraped the leavings of his apple into a bin in a cupboard, put his plate and knife in the sink, washed his hands and then paused, and turned to face Will again.

“What did happen to you this evening, Will?”

Will shrugged. “Work stuff. You don’t,” - he rubbed his knuckles into one eye again, the one that was throbbing - “you really don’t want to know.”

“Would you like some ibuprofen?” Hannibal took two steps towards him and then stopped, as if thinking better of it. “You have a headache?”

Will shrugged. “It’s nothing.”

Hannibal walked out of the room.

For a while Will just sat in his chair, continuing to rub his fingers over his temples. He wasn’t sure where Hannibal had gone. Going after him might be the idea, or it might be very much not intended. Eventually, Will got up and went to the sink, running himself another glass of water.

He heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and realized that Hannibal must have left the entire apartment, and was now coming back. He went to sit in his chair again, drumming his fingers on the tablecloth.

“Here,” Hannibal said, coming back into the room. He held out a blister sheet of tablets. “Ibuprofen.” He reached into his pocket and produced a small box. “And Tylenol, if you’d prefer. You can take them together, it’s often best that way.”

“OK?” Will pushed out the four tablets and swallowed them down with his water. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to push you into doctor-mode.”

“Dominant mode,” Hannibal corrected him, his face serious. “Or it should be. I am sorry, Will.”

“You’re sorry? What the fuck?” Will laughed. “I’ve just basically ruined your evening and made you go on some quest for… and you’re going to apologize to me?”

“Yes.” Hannibal came a little closer and reached out his hand, perhaps a little tentatively, and squeezed Will’s shoulder. “You have had a long and clearly unpleasant day. You have made the journey here rather than cry off, even though you are clearly not much in the mood for what we planned. You did not feel you could call me to cancel, and that must be my fault. And then I have been cold to you, and ignored your obvious signs of distress. That is not… That is a failure in the role of Dominant, on my part.”

“I’m not some fragile Sub that needs, I don’t know…” Will sighed. “I’m not going to break into sobbing pieces because I got a spanking - we can do whatever you want, I’m fine.”

“If you are to be my Submissive at all this evening,” Hannibal said firmly, “then first in my mind should be what is best for you. I had planned you an evening I hoped would be agreeable to you, but I fear I got lost in my own plan rather than continue to focus on my goal. I was… not correct.” His hand wandered from Will’s shoulder, and brushed gently against the side of Will’s head. Hannibal’s skin was cool against the tense muscles, and Will couldn’t help leaning into the touch slightly.

Hannibal stepped back at once, as though burnt.

Will felt himself blushing.

So, this wasn't awkward and horrendous at all.

"What did you have planned tonight? Specifically?" Will asked. "Because I really am willing to give it my best shot… I mean we have to get this done, so…"

An expression passed over Hannibal's face too quickly for Will to parse. Hannibal's mouth opened slightly, and he sucked his bee-stung upper lip into his mouth, sharp and quick. Then he closed his eyes for a moment – not quite lowering that penetrating gaze but it was still a very slight deference to Will's eyes on him.

"There is a new plan, now," Hannibal said. "We need to have a documentable session, true, but you need to rest. Perhaps – perhaps I will draw you?"

"Pardon me?" Will frowned. "What's 'drawing'? I haven't heard of that. Is it…" he frowned, only able to think of unpleasant possibilities.

"Drawing?" Hannibal actually chuckled. "Perhaps you might prefer me to say 'sketching'? Putting your image on paper?"

"Oh! Oh right," Will blushed even more fiercely, and felt like an idiot. "I'm sorry, I just heard the verb and thought… I really wasn't imagining you actually meant, like… Fuck."

"I believe I should ask you to moderate your language," Hannibal said quietly. He cleared his throat, "I have long enjoyed sketching as a leisure activity, and I have some supplies downstairs in my office - it would take only a moment to retrieve them. It is something that I find relaxing, and I think being a subject would not be too much for you. But also I must pose you, keep you still – it would fit the parameters necessary to qualify as a Dominance session." He paused, swallowed:

"Do you think you can keep still for me, Will?"

Will took a sharp breath in. The air between them had changed, somehow, with just those words.

"Yeah," he said. His voice was full of Acceptance he'd not even thought about putting there. "Okay."

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Whilst Hannibal was fetching his art supplies, Will padded back to the 'bedroom' and through to wash his face at the en-suite sink, enjoying the coolness of the water. He noticed a tube of L'Occitane en Provence moisturizer on a shelf and put some onto his hands, where the skin was drying and chapping near his knuckles after too many walks in the wind after forgetting his gloves. It passed the time, helped him stop his mind from undertaking too much self-analysis.

If the idea of making Hannibal feel better felt good, why not just go with it and leave questions behind?

He was pleased to find, when Hannibal had returned and called him through to the living room, that Hannibal had set up only one electric light – a lamp in the corner – and the room was otherwise gently illuminated by a row of tea-lights on the built-in shelves at the other end. As they burnt they were releasing a very slight aroma of pine. The soft light was easy on the eyes, and really rather calming.

There was some sort of couch in the room now - low, without arms, with a soft white blanket thrown over it, and a few satin-covered cushions in rusty red.

Their original evening plans had focused, no doubt, on that couch. Will couldn't help wondering a little what those plans might have been.

"Just lie down there as is comfortable for you," Hannibal said, gesturing. He'd got an armchair for himself in the corner where the lamp was, with a plain-bound volume that was presumably his sketchbook resting on the floor next to it. He was in the process of rolling up

his shirtsleeves – to preserve them from the charcoal or graphite, Will guessed – and so revealing corded forearms, the dark hairs turned golden in the lamp light.

“I should probably warn you that I might fall asleep if I actually lie down,” Will said, getting onto the couch as instructed.

“If you need to so badly, then you should, Will.” Hannibal sat and picked up his sketchbook, opening it and smoothing down a new page.

“Wouldn’t that be rude? And then I might not be able to stay still for you.” Will wasn’t sure why that even mattered to him, but the idea tugged at the back of his mind, another irritation now that the ache was receding.

Hannibal looked at him for a moment, frowning slightly. “Talk to me, then,” he said. “Tell me about this terrible day.”

“No,” Will laughed. “You didn’t sign up for any of that.”

“Is it a secret?”

“No! But it’s pretty boring.”

“Who will you tell?”

“No one, I guess. My dogs, probably. I have three, all rescues. My neighbor Beverly looks out for them when I’m out or whatever.”

“But you don’t talk to Beverly about your troubles?”

Will shrugged. “We’re just passing acquaintances really, or… I suppose some people would be more, by now, but I’m not… I don’t do social situations particularly well.” Will shifted on the couch. He’d lain down on his back like it was a bed, and that probably didn’t make the most interesting pose to draw. The only alternative that occurred to him, though, was to be on one side with a knee bent up and his hand on his chin like a 1940s starlet ready for their close-up, which he winced even to think of.

“Um. Do you want to tell me how to sit?”

“As you were is fine.”

Will chewed his lip, letting out a breath that sounded a bit like a sigh.

“Lean back,” Hannibal said, then, voice soft, Commendation and Command twisting through the words in perfect harmony. “Bring your legs together.”

Will obeyed. More muscles in his back and shoulders started to relax, the throbbing behind his eyes receding.

“Raise that cushion behind your neck so that you can rest your head without discomfort, and lay your head down. Arrange your left arm across your lap and let the wrist relax with your palm up. Place the other arm at your side. Now angle your face to look at me.”

Will got himself into place. It was a comfortable couch, he’d found. He felt pretty good now – the painkillers were probably kicking in.

And Hannibal hadn’t made him bare his throat. Had rather specifically ordered against it, in fact, as if for whatever reason he didn’t want to take that from Will tonight.

Will rested his cheek against the smooth-scratch of the satin cushion, and let his gaze settle on the pocket handkerchief in Hannibal’s waistcoat, and the way it moved very slightly as Hannibal breathed and moved his arm in its sketching.

“You were going to explain about your day,” Hannibal prompted. There was a very slight scratching noise from his pencil.

“Well, as you know I work in the Institute of Psychiatry and Psychology at Langley U,” Will said, sighing. “And I’ve been asked to write a peer review for some research by a company called CETApharm on a new anti-anxiety drug called Nurizon. Well, if I said CETApharm owned our Institute, I wouldn’t be far wrong, and it’s all gotten a bit complicated...”

Hannibal made an encouraging noise and Will explained the rest of it, up to and including his less than stellar planning and the confrontation that evening.

He’d expected telling the story to be a resuscitation of all the stress associated with it, but it felt more like lancing an abscess, letting all the worries of the past few weeks flow out as he kept his body still and serene, conscious of Hannibal’s gaze on him, of Hannibal’s listening attention.

“… and once they had the broken down vehicle cleared, I knew I was going to be so late no matter what I did, so it didn’t seem worth speeding and risking getting a ticket, and I was kind of dreading getting here anyway, so…” Will sighed. “And you’d cooked, which I didn’t even think of – I didn’t think, basically, and… And I’m sorry. I do apologize. Like I said before, I’m just not… great at the Sub thing.”

“Both of our behaviors tonight could have stood improvement, that I grant you,” Hannibal said. At some point he’d set the sketchbook down, and now he rose from his chair, coming slowly across the carpet towards the couch. Will felt a bit weird to be staying mostly horizontal whilst Hannibal stood over him, but just then being physically below Hannibal seemed better than trying to rise, and in some strangely urgent way.

Hannibal’s hand was moving, was coming to rest lightly on the top of Will’s head, gently pushing at his hair.

“You have been very good, here,” Hannibal said, all Commendation, and Will couldn’t help a wriggle of pleasure, a sort of preening reflex running through him as he briefly closed his eyes under the sensation.

“Are you feeling any better?” Hannibal continued.

“Much better. Thank you,” Will said. “And is there…” He swallowed. “Could I do anything else for you?”

He thought he probably wouldn’t even really mind a spanking now, relaxed as he was. And if it would make Hannibal happy, well, Hannibal deserved something good out of the evening too.

“I believe I would find it most… satisfactory,” Hannibal said slowly, “if you would give me permission to contact you - perhaps via text messages – between this session and the next and so enquire after your energy levels.” He paused and stepped backwards, taking the gentle pressure of his hand from Will’s head.

“I know,” Hannibal continued, and gave a sharp sigh, “that you express no wish to have your daily routines controlled by a Dominant, and indeed I stated that I had no interest in that aspect of power exchange either. That is not what I mean. I wish simply that I could… be assured you were not in this state again. I believe… Yes, I do believe that I shall worry about you.”

“I didn’t tell you any of that to make you worry.”

“I know. Maybe that is why I am asking.”

“You say ‘asking’ and not ‘offering’?”

“Yes. Because I know that I would be receiving something of value, in excess of what I could ever give by simply fulfilling the functions of a half-decent personal assistant smartphone application, if you were ever likely to get one.”

Will, who'd been feeling oddly choked, unable to think what to do or say, laughed at that.

"Sure! Fine. OK," he ducked his head for a moment – Hannibal's gaze was a bit like a full-on sunbeam, delightful in a way but not something you wanted without any let-up. "I guess you can ask how I'm doing, sure."

"Good." Hannibal took yet another step back, reaching his chair, and smiled.

Then he picked up the sketchbook and held it out in front of him. "Do you wish to see your portrait?"

Will did sit up now, getting his feet on the floor, and took it, then laughed again.

"I hate to disillusion you, but that's really not what my muscle groups look like under these clothes."

Hannibal had drawn him nude – it was scarcely risqué, as at the angle at which he'd been posed nothing remotely provocative was visible – and in a what looked like a Greco-Roman setting, on a suitably antique bier, surrounded by armor and discarded weaponry. A weary warrior, it might have been titled.

"You're very good," Will admitted, and smiled. "And free with your artistic license. I don't think they let Subs fight in those days."

"A common misconception. Many of the heroes of Ancient Greek legend were originally characterized as Submissive. It was the Romans, who had rather different ideas about societal roles, who changed the histories. There have always been strong Submissives. I can lend you a book on the subject if you would like?"

Will nodded, fascinated.

“And now, dessert?” Hannibal asked. “And may I suggest that you spend the night here, in this apartment? On this very couch in fact? I do not like to think of you driving, if your neighbor can see to your dogs, and I can give you a key and leave you with the wherewithal for breakfast.”

Will smiled slightly. “I’m OK, Hannibal. I’m just a bit tired. Less tired now. And I’m sure I’ll feel even better after whatever you’ve made for dessert.”

Of course, Will reflected as they went back to the kitchen, Hannibal would have had to make the apartment ready for an overnight stay, because if they had had an ordinary sort of session between Dom and Sub, it was always possible that the Sub would be too spaced-out to leave the building for several hours. Not likely – not with their mutual limitations, not with Will’s history of resistance to dropping down – but possible and therefore important ethically, even legally, to consider. Failure to provide adequate after-care facilities was a prosecutable offence.

Hannibal, then, would have made the place ready, but would no doubt be glad not to actually have Will to worry about overnight or clean up after – as he almost certainly would, Will suspected, no matter what efforts Will might have made.

In the kitchen, Hannibal produced two wine glasses from the fridge, each filled with a perfectly set tiramisu, and proceeded to whip cream to top them.

Will sat down again on a chair that had been carefully furnished with a cushion on the seat, and was made oddly conscious by it of his unmarked backside, and his unhandled skin.

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Three

“I thought you said this guy was just for like, basic, tick-box sessions to keep the health panel happy for your job application?” Beverly asked, one eyebrow raised.

Will sighed. “Yes, that’s exactly what he is. But he’s still the Dom, so if he picks something a bit… left-field to do, and I agree, then that counts, that ticks the box. And this time he wants me to go to an opera.”

The eyebrow did not go down.

“He’s had a tough week, I think,” Will said. “He’s into opera, I guess. This was the only night he could get tickets to go, and it’s also the only the night I had free, with the mid-semester tutorials to do, and we do have to get those boxes ticked on time, and so, yeah, that’s why.”

“Will, he’s taking you to a show. Sounds like a date to me.” Beverly leant down to scoop Malteaser – Will’s Maltese-and-possibly-terrier cross – off the floor and onto her lap, stroking him and scratching behind his ears as he gazed up at her adoringly.

It had turned out that on the night of Will’s Bad Day – over three weeks ago now - she’d dealt with Malteaser managing to get into one of Will’s cabinets and eating several dishwasher tablets – had gone to the out of hours vet and everything – and he’d felt after that that he really ought to make a few more overtures of friendship. This had become much easier to do when he’d learnt from her that she’d got a Sub and was in a long-term relationship.

Though of course, if it had been a matter of managing expectations, Will sort of had a Dom. In the vaguest, loosest sense.

“No, nothing like that. We’re not even sitting together, actually,” Will protested, aware that he was sounding a bit defensive. “He got me a seat on the other side of the dress circle from where he is. I did try to make him change it for the stalls, because there’s no need to spend that kind of money, but he insisted.”

“Not sitting together? Why?”

Will shrugged. “Hannibal doesn’t like making his personal business visible in public. He told me he’s never been out with a Sub. I don’t think he’s ever exactly dated, to be honest. He’s a very private person – I told you we don’t meet at his house. But it’s not like I’m even actually his Sub, not like… like that sounds. So if we were seen together it would just give loads of people the wrong idea anyway. And it’s not like I want to field those questions.”

“I don’t know, it sounds messed up to me.” Beverley frowned, and drew Malteaser closer – he licked her face. “I think if I told Freddie I was Commanding her to attend something and then said I’d deliberately made us sit apart, she’d tell me where to get off. And she’d be right to.”

“But it’s different with you guys. You’re actually a couple. I’m comfortable with this, honestly,” Will told her, and got up to go and get the popcorn out of the microwave.

Which still made him feel vaguely like he was walking onto the set of the movie of someone else’s life. Hanging out with a friend, discussing session partners? He’d never thought that would be his Sunday afternoon schedule.

But as it was turning out, it wasn’t so excruciatingly bad.

Will had politely refused Beverley’s offer of a DVD and take-out the week before, pleading his then still-present need to write the Nurizon review. But that now was finally done – done, so he wasn’t going to think about it any more. He’d written a positive piece for them, alluding only vaguely to the need, with any new drug, for full safety checks. He’d figured out how to make a workable solution with Hannibal, he’d toed the line with CETApharm – this felt strangely like being a functional adult, and clearly it was just what you had to do. At any rate, Jack was pleased with him.

Alana had told him she’d looked into the numbers and the lab records again after he’d left that evening, and that there was no trace of anything left to point a finger at. She was disgusted with CETApharm’s behavior too – and Chilton’s– but even she hadn’t suggested there was any possibility to do anything else.

And here Will was, having politely returned Beverley's invitation with his own this weekend, suggesting she visit him so as not to leave the dogs alone, and he really might have passed for a normal person.

Socializing was certainly strange – it had been years, at least, since he'd done something like this – but if nothing else it would be a good way to fill his fridge, and so give him a clear conscience for answering Hannibal's well-being texts, which had, as promised, started arriving on a regular basis.

Will was conscious that if he'd been asked before meeting Hannibal how he'd feel about a Dom having any say in how he lived his day to day life, he would have been most certainly – to use Beverley's phrase = telling them were to get off.

But Hannibal wasn't ordering him about or demanding constant updates, or pushing him at all.

It was just that, every evening, around half past six, Will would get a text:

>*Hello Will. Are you feeling well today?*

And if Will sent back nothing but *'Yes'*, then that was it; Hannibal left him alone. But if he sent something in the negative, the questions would follow:

>*Have you eaten? Do you have enough food?*

>*Do you need painkillers?*

>*How is your hydration?*

>*Do you need a nap? I can call you to wake you up if necessary.*

And if Will agreed to one measure or another, however cursorily, once more Hannibal would leave him alone. Sometimes Will would follow up with another text - something like *'Better now'* - and sometimes he'd keep quiet. Sometimes he had never actually done as Hannibal suggested, but it wasn't like they were bad ideas or there was anything to be gained by ignoring them besides proving a point to himself that no one else was going to know about anyway.

Actually, if you interpreted the questions as Commands, which was theoretically possible, the whole thing did fulfill several criteria for 'additional interactions' on the alignment health checklist – Will had looked it up again - which he thought was probably why Hannibal was so conscientious and regular about it. Despite his attentiveness, though, Hannibal never asked Will for proof of what he'd stated or said he'd done; if Will said he was fine, Hannibal would leave him alone – that was well outside official alignment health guidelines, but Will wasn't about to mention it.

During the three weeks since their last session, there had been a couple of times when Will had dismissed Hannibal's enquiries with a casual *'Fine'*, only to pick up his phone again soon after and wonder about sending a clarification, admitting that maybe he wasn't feeling so great after all, seeing what Hannibal's response to that might be.

He'd never done so; it seemed like opening a door to the daunting prospect of actual conversation. He didn't know if or how to respond with inquiries of his own, had no clue how to phrase the fact that he had wondered, more than once, how Hannibal was doing.

Indeed, they hadn't communicated beyond those simple text exchanges since the last session, which was why Will had been so surprised, the night before, to get the call about the opera. Even though he'd known they needed to get another session scheduled to stay on target, he'd assumed he would be getting an email.

Hannibal, it seemed, had chosen to call because of the time-pressure of purchasing the tickets. Once Will had agreed to going, he'd completed their booking whilst still on the phone, and had then explained about the seating arrangements, the timing and the dress code.

And then he had stopped mid-flow; pausing for what Will could hear was a yawn.

“Hey, um,” Will had gripped his phone hard in his hand, uncertain. “Are you feeling OK?”

“Yes, fine, thank you,” Hannibal said curtly. “It has simply been a very long day at the hospital.”

Will bit his tongue and then stopped, and breathed, and spoke. “Who are you going to tell about it?”

A short, soft laugh. Hannibal didn’t sound offended, but the weariness had crept back into his voice. “Nothing much to tell. A patient died. That does tend to happen in Oncology.”

“But this patient was different.”

Will thought he heard Hannibal swallowing. He wondered if Hannibal had a decent coffee source close to hand; if he was stuck in the hospital rather than in his office; how he was going to relax. Drawing? Drawing someone else, perhaps?

“Yes,’ Hannibal was saying softly. “Yes, she was different. Quite a young girl, and she’d had a difficult time already before the cancer. Her parents… well, one should not speak of that, but she had quite wonderful potential and I was hoping it would not be truncated in this way. She had been in decline for a while, but I did still hope…” He took a sharp breath, and made an attempt at a laugh. “I wish, of course, to help – to save – all my patients, but somehow her the most, certainly of late.”

“You’re a doctor, you’re not God!”

Will closed his eyes for a moment and tried again.

“I’m sorry that happened.”

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal said softly, and drew in a deep breath.

Will had wondered for a moment if Hannibal was going to ask for something else from him - something besides the promise of the opera next week. Full sessions couldn't be done over the phone, of course, but a Sub could still offer small Obediences, and a lot of Doms liked that and could apparently feel pretty good from that alone.

Will wondered if he ought to make the offer himself. Let Hannibal actually specifically pick out what he'd eat for dinner that night, or how he'd wash himself or how long he'd floss for or something, if it pleased him.

"Well, I shall see you next Wednesday, then," Hannibal said after another moment of silence. "Till then, Will."

"Make him buy you a drink at the interval, at least," Beverley was saying now. She'd put Malteaser down and had her wallet out, organizing cash for the delivery guy.

"Yeah, well, he's making dinner for us after the show – after the performance, so…"

Beverley looked up, eyebrow rising again. "The answer to your question is: Yes, Will, I will be OK to keep an eye on your dogs all through Wednesday night and Thursday morning if you and your not-a-date somehow end up making the evening last overnight."

"It's not like that!" Will protested again.

Beverley made yappy-face hands at him and threw the DVD case in his direction.

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Hannibal had sent a QR code for Will's ticket to his phone as soon as the booking was confirmed, so there was no need for them to meet before the opera began. There was something, Will thought, oddly clinical about that, for an opera lover. He was prepared to bet

that Hannibal's own ticket had physical form, not just printed out but issued from the opera house's box office, elegant on thick paper.

Will's experience was not expected to be on the same level, and Will pretty much agreed with that assessment.

It might have been nice to be less conscious of his presence being purely to make up numbers – to solve the problem of their busy schedules and the demands of the alignment health assessment – but no matter how you packaged it, that was the truth of their situation, their arrangement, and this, once more, was a form of session as unintimidating as Will could ever have imagined.

It wasn't like Will hadn't had his chances to move into cultural circles – the university had clubs that visited all kinds of events and got discounted tickets in bulk – but those he'd avoided, in order to avoid the socialization that went with them, and this was several leagues ahead of that, this – he could see as soon as his cab dropped him off near the opera house - was the cream of Baltimore society turning out in force to be seen in their finery.

Indeed, as Will made his way upstairs to his door for the dress circle, he kept expecting to be stopped and challenged, and told that there was no way he could belong in the expensive seats.

He was going to have to pay Hannibal back, he found himself thinking. Somehow when Hannibal had brought the whole thing up, Will had accepted his apparent assumption that he would be buying for them both without a second thought; Hannibal wanted to inconvenience Will by making him sit through an opera, and so Hannibal – who had much more spare income anyway – could pay for it. That had seemed reasonable enough.

Now, aware of moving in high society - which of course meant society still fifty odd years behind the rest in terms of social convention - Will felt acutely conscious of being a lone, unaccompanied Sub, and here on someone else's dollar, and all the things these people might take that to imply.

He was, at least, not late. Not technically. He had, however, barely taken his seat before the house lights went down and the overture started, leaving him no time to look around for

Hannibal, or to take in much of anyone else's reaction to himself. And that was probably no bad thing.

Sitting back in his very comfortable seat, Will tried to focus on the opera. He had done some reading – well, on Wikipedia at least – to prepare, as he was fully expecting to doze off during the actual performance.

Die Zauberflöte, Will had learnt, was an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – himself often controversially claimed as a Sub by Submissives' History academics. It told the story of a young male Dom, Tamino, and his quest to find his true love - female Sub Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night - Pamina having supposedly been kidnapped by sorcerer Sarastro. Finding Pamina, Tamnio would come to understand that Sarastro had taken her to rescue her from her mother's evil influences, and that Sarastro's land was actually a utopian kingdom of wisdom. Sarastro then took on Tamino as his acolyte and after the lovers overcame trials of fire and water they would go forward together to a bright future.

Will hadn't been sure he approved of the subtext of any of that, but as he read the article his eye had caught on a note lower down the webpage about *Significant Productions*. It listed the Raverat Setting of the opera – which he knew from the ticket email was the one he was attending – as notably controversial for making Tamino a Sub and Pamina a Dom, subtly altering the libretto to accommodate this, with staging and dressing also changed accordingly. When that version had first debuted in 1912, or so the webpage said, it had caused a storm of conservative backlash, and performances in modern times still triggered waves of protest.

That was something Will could get behind.

Nonetheless he had not expected to become as engaged as he found himself to be when, the curtain coming down to mark the start of the interval, he was sitting forward in his seat and clutching some small plastic binocular things that he'd paid a dollar to retrieve from a little clamp attached to the seat in front.

Now he took the chance of the house lights going up to look across the raked seats of the dress circle, binocular things raised, to try and spot Hannibal.

It didn't take long. Hannibal was a few rows lower than him, but right at the other side of the auditorium, at the other end of the wide arc of the circle seats, still seated and with his

attention apparently on his program.

This was the first time that Will had observed Hannibal without Hannibal's knowledge. It gave him a slightly odd feeling, as if of transgression.

Not that there was anything he thought Hannibal wouldn't want to have seen. The man was, of course, perfectly turned out, well dressed and well groomed to a fault.

And yet, there was something… Will couldn't help any more than he could, at first, explain, a sense of unease, a certain discomfort as he viewed what ought to be a perfectly normal scene.

There was something, perhaps, in the set of Hannibal's shoulders, the line of his neck…

Will put the binocular things down, blinked rapidly, frowned, and looked again.

Hannibal really was tense, Will was sure of it. Tense in that way that made your joints ache and your stomach clench, and trying to hide that he was. Staring at the program but not moving his gaze, not really reading, not turning the pages. Lost somewhere behind his eyes.

Will wondered whether to do something – send a text? Even in the interval, though, using a mobile phone was probably blasphemy in the actual auditorium – and even if Will decided not to care, Hannibal's phone was no doubt completely turned off and interred in a deep pocket.

Hannibal not wanting them to be seen together would make a lot more sense if he simply didn't feel equal to any company at all – Will certainly had had those days in his time.

If Hannibal wasn't up for a lot of talking after the show, Will would understand. They could just go back to the apartment quietly, enjoy a low-key meal – Will could help with the cooking, or take himself away and read a book, or even do something a bit ridiculous like kneel on the floor at Hannibal's feet - if it would help, if it would be soothing to him.

Hannibal had taken care of him after all, and he was ready to do the same in return. That would be simply good manners, of a kind he'd signally failed to display at their last meeting. Tonight, he could at least play his part in helping them both make the most of the artificial situation they'd been thrust into together – a situation which, he was now prepared to admit, they could gain at least something from if they made the effort.

Will sat back in his seat, keeping his gaze on Hannibal's bowed shoulders. If Hannibal looked up, Will decided, he would hold his gaze for a second, then duck his head at once – show how ready he was to be Accepting, and hope that would be reassuring.

Hannibal might be expecting to have to deal with Will in a bad mood tonight, after all, as well as whatever he himself was going through. Will could at least take that worry away.

Abruptly, Will realized that there was now a group of three people approaching Hannibal's seat – Hannibal was placed right at the end of a row, just on the aisle, easy to access.

Two women and a man, all Doms, dressed to the nines and clearly all talking and gesticulating at each other. One of the women reached out with her gloved hand and clasped Hannibal's shoulder, and Will flinched on his behalf, waiting to see how Hannibal would choose to get rid of them.

But all at once Hannibal was all smiles and laughter, standing up, shaking hands, and kissing cheeks. The people started to move away and back up the stairs to exit, and Hannibal was following them, one lady's arm linked through his, which suggested that despite her clothes she was a Sub. She was leaning her other hand on his shoulder, her head tilted forward, her grin full of teeth.

Will realized the pain in his fingers was from how tightly he was gripping the opera binoculars – the hard plastic had left angry red lines on his skin.

He looked up again. At the top of the stairs the group had turned – the other man was pointing something out about the architecture or decoration of the roof. As Hannibal looked round, Will was ready to look away if Hannibal looked at him, but it didn't happen.

And what, he wondered, would Hannibal have made of the sight of him, in his hired tuxedo that had probably been sweated into by a thousand other people through a thousand weddings, with his hair cut and his chin shaved by his own hand, since he so loathed other people touching his scalp?

(Not that Hannibal would guess that, since Will hadn't exactly remembered to complain when Hannibal had touched him there.)

No doubt Will looked less than up to par, and no doubt Hannibal had known that would be the case. Hannibal had said he wouldn't countenance being seen with a Sub in public, but he had one on his arm now – and now another, Will saw, as more people joined Hannibal's group, and a young man with a wave of blond curls made a small, old-fashioned bow of missivine deference and looked up at Hannibal through his lashes as he drew closer to him.

Gradually they all drifted off through the dress circle doors and presumably to foyer and the bar, and Will was left with the harsh sound of his own breathing.

The people sitting next to him had left a program on their seats. Will took it and flicked hastily through the pages, trying to find anything to distract him. There was a piece of writing analyzing the opera in relation to the *Changing Status of Submissives in Europe During and After the First World War* - Will kept re-reading paragraphs.

Eventually the interval ended. Will kept his face forward and didn't turn to see if or when Hannibal re-took his seat.

The opera got once more underway. Tamino was led to the Temple of Ordeal. He and Pamina exchanged promises of love. The Queen of the Night broke into Pamina's bedroom and delivered an aria demanding vengeance. Then Sarastro came, and reassured the distraught Pamina that she could sleepy safely under his protection, for no bad thing could come to hurt her within his walls. As a reassurance framed as being from one Dom to another, it was peculiarly touching.

Will didn't know quite what caused him to turn his gaze from the stage at that moment – he was once more absorbed and freshly determined not to turn around - but something made him and he did, binoculars still held to his eyes, and despite the dim light he found he saw Hannibal at once, and distinctly.

Hannibal's face was rapt. His eyes were wide, and glistening. As Will watched, a tear rolled down his face, shining for a moment.

Will felt sick, and suddenly - an ache in his guts, a shiver of cold across his skin. His heart was racing and he couldn't name the feeling spurring it – guilt or shame, or fear, or horror, distress or disgust – only that his skin itched with the intensity of it. With an urgent demand for movement he couldn't make.

The music kept on coming, and Will turned back and tried to lose himself in it again.

Hannibal wasn't going anywhere, Hannibal was perfectly safe – that the thoughts were reassuring was nonsensical, but when Will found they calmed him he repeated them over and over to himself.

There were things they needed to talk about, but that would come. They had time, after this. They could straighten it all out.

On the stage, Tamino knelt in Submission and Acceptance before Pamina. She put out her hands to raise his head, to bite his neck and Acknowledge him as her own, the highest recognition between Dom and Sub, and Will felt another bolt of nausea through his stomach. His hands grasped at the arms of his seat, fingers rubbing sore against the luxurious red plush as he fought against the need to get up.

At last the curtain fell on the final scene, and then rose again as the cast came out to take their bows. Will clapped automatically, and finally let himself look across the auditorium once more, finding Hannibal was out of his seat with emotion. There was more light now, and Will was almost sure Hannibal's eyes were still looking a little red.

Whatever had happened this week had been, for Hannibal, more than hard, more than tiring; enough to crack something of his façade.

And it had meant Hannibal had needed to come to this opera.

And Will's presence, apparently, was merely an inescapable inconvenience.

The anger and sympathy were already twining confusingly enough within him when Will felt the vibration of a notification from his silent phone, and reached to check it.

It was the last thing he'd expected: a message from Hannibal:

>I am afraid I must cancel our dinner plans and beg a postponement. Please take yourself to a meal wherever you would like and send me the bill. I will also of course pay your taxi fares home. My apologies.

Will stared at his phone for a moment, mouth open in shock and disbelief, and then looked quickly back to the other side of the dress circle.

Hannibal had vanished.

He had been sitting at the end of a row, Will was not, and it took him some stumbling and squeezing and earned him many irritated tuts from the those he passed as he made his way to the aisle closest to him and then went rapidly up the steps to the exit, going through the heavy swing doors to the dress circle's foyer.

Hannibal was nowhere to be seen. Some of the ushers were giving Will disapproving looks – back in the auditorium, the cast were still taking their curtain calls.

Will went to the high windows looking out over the street below the opera house. The existing plan had been for him to meet Hannibal after the opera at a spot about three blocks away and then for them to hail a cab together, but almost certainly Hannibal would now have taken one from the queue opposite the theatre, and be even now speeding back to his actual house, wherever that was.

Will rested his head against the glass, and drew a heavy breath.

Nothing that had happened should be bothering him in the slightest.

They'd had a session, still, after all, just about, so that ticked the box, and to have completed a session without exchanging two words with a Dom – barely even breathing the same air – would have sounded like an ideal scenario to Will six weeks earlier.

A Dom who was barely interested in him; he'd knowingly signed up for that, and eagerly too.

And Hannibal had fucking *left him*, and didn't deserve a second more of Will's consideration, hadn't earned his anxiety.

Will could go to a fancy restaurant in the city, get something expensive – very expensive - boxed up to take away, charge Hannibal for it as suggested, bring it home and relax on the sofa with his dogs and watch re-runs of *Bitchin' Kitchen*, and not give another shit about anything. Wait for a message to reconvene another time for another session with Hannibal, rote as robots, and just tick the boxes all over again.

Thing was though, Will didn't feel hungry. His insides were still that sick, cold lump of ache. His skin still shivered and prickled.

Hannibal had gone out into the cold, alone, upset, and whether or not that should be any of Will's concern, apparently his brain wasn't going to stop fixating on it.

Not slowing down to let himself think it through, Will leant against the wall by the window and brought up his phone again, dialing Jack's number.

"Crawford Residence," a voice answered him after a few rings, a voice female and slightly husky. "Can I help you?"

“Uh, yeah, sorry. This is Will Graham, from Jack’s work? I thought… I was trying to get hold of him?”

“Good evening, Will Graham. This is Bella Crawford speaking, Jack’s wife. Jack’s out just now at a party for his niece. But can I be of assistance?”

Any other time Will would have demurred and cut off the conversation then and there, but the thousand agitated itches of his skin drove his words out.

“Yes, actually, thank you. Could you see if your husband still has a profile printout from Alignment Matching in his briefcase, about a guy called Hannibal Lecter? And if so could you get it out and tell me his address?”

It occurred to Will only after he’d spoken that for all he knew Bella was too unwell to leave her bed, quite aside from how rude it was of him to make requests of a Dom he’d never been introduced to in person.

But she simply told him to wait a moment, and for a little while the phone was silent.

“Before I give you this information,” Bella said after a while – she sounded rather breathless, but still powerful – “could you tell me what you’re planning to do with it?”

“He left me here,” Will heard himself saying, under his breath.

“Excuse me? I didn’t catch that.”

“I have to…I owe him. I need to pay him back some money for an opera ticket.”

There was a pause before she read out the address. It had been a stupid excuse and Will wondered how much she could read from his voice. But she didn’t ask any more questions,

and soon Will was heading out of the theatre himself, ready to hail the first cab he saw, still trying to move his feet before his brain could catch up with them.

- - -

Hannibal's house, a miniature mansion of the Romantic Revival, was even more imposing than his office building, and, unsurprisingly perhaps, turned out to be only a few blocks away from it.

Leaving his cab and walking up to the door, Will considered his options with a rolling boil of emotions that felt a lot like fury, and which had stayed with him all through his journey. Emotions that seemed to be making him feel as though his senses were heightened, and that he was thinking as clearly as he ever had, entirely in control of what he did, a master tactician of human interaction.

He wouldn't just ring the bell. He wouldn't put himself in a position to have the door closed in his face. He wouldn't make Hannibal come to the door at all, unless Hannibal wanted to open it for him.

Will sent a quick text:

>*Outside your house. Tell me to go again, and I will leave.*

Then he waited, pacing up and down in the cold and the snow that was starting to fall again, gloved fingers jabbed into the armpits of his coat, wondering whether Hannibal even had his phone on.

When he heard the click of the door starting to open, Will spun round.

Hannibal stood in the doorway, his jacket now removed, his shirt sleeves rolled up and his bowtie hanging round his neck undone. His shoulders still looked like they had carried the weight of the world.

He stared at Will, frowning, and Will kept his head up and stared back, defiant, and started walking towards him.

Every nerve jangled as Will got closer, still forcing himself to hold Hannibal's gaze. His mouth was dry; he had to swallow before he could speak, and no doubt Hannibal would have noted it.

Will had any number of thoughts to express, but as he came within touching distance of something nuanced and clever, what he actually heard himself saying was, "So I'm not allowed to help you?"

His voice sounded oddly calm, considering how he felt.

"If you didn't want me to see you like this, Hannibal, you shouldn't have invited me along to this evening in the first place. I know you tried to keep me away from you. I know you put on your mask for the people you did talk to. But I saw you all the same."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. Will braced for some kind of retributive onslaught, with dread and excitement in that old cocktail running through him.

There was a silence.

"We will not have this conversation in the street." Hannibal said, frosty, and having thus carefully disclaimed why he was doing so, stood back to let Will in.

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Familiar now with the neutral furnishings of the apartment on Hulton Street, Will had started to forget the rather inaccessible grandeur of Hannibal's office, and all it denoted of Hannibal's personal taste.

Hannibal's home interior was much like that of his office, except even worse. Intricate marble and porphyry flooring, small woodcut prints in gold-lacquered frames, arrangements of silk flowers, bronze statuettes – nothing visibly practical, nothing dusty, nothing out of place. As far from the domestic and dog-haired disorder of Will's own house as it was possible to get. It was almost like being onstage back at the opera house.

But this house was not for show, not to be shown, and Will knew he was an invader, here.

Having closed his front door, Hannibal turned, hands at his sides.

"This is not what I requested that you do," he said. He sounded more than affronted. Confused.

Will fumbled with his gloves before shoving them into his pocket. He knew his own agitation was betrayed in his every twitch, and decided not to care.

"No. You wanted to run away from me."

"A dramatic turn of phrase for asking a grown man to take a taxi home at my expense."

"What happened to all your talk about looking after my needs?"

"I am not able to look after you tonight." Hannibal still looked half amazed. "I cannot give you anything at the moment. I have no wish to discuss this further, hence my request that we part. You must leave now." Hannibal put Command into the final words, but it didn't quite come off, cracking at the edges, and Will was glad to hear it – let Hannibal struggle too, he didn't want him comfortable.

"I won't leave," Will said, and took three steps toward where Hannibal stood, keeping his gaze up and fixed all the while, his hands clenching with the effort it took. "I won't leave

you. I don't want to obey you in this. So what do you think I need now? Do I need discipline? Chastisement? Training? Only you don't care, do you? You can't be bothered with me and how I am, I should have guessed as much from the first time you avoided touching me."

For a split second Hannibal's eyes widened.

"You do not know what you are asking of me."

"I'm not asking!" Will protested – he didn't know quite what he meant, what he wanted, what his point was. He felt better – safer – now with Hannibal next to him, close enough to smell the expensive red wine on his breath, than he had all evening up till then, for all his heart raced and his skin was flashing hot and then cold in waves of emotion.

"You may not want your friends to see me," Will continued, raising his hand in emphasis, falling only just short of jabbing Hannibal in the chest. "But you *have* to see me, that's the price you pay. I'm not doing you any favors."

"You think I do not see you?"

Hannibal hadn't shouted, but the hall seemed to ring with the words. Hannibal's lip curled back, he smiled viciously.

"You think I can't see you, Will? What you are? What you do to me?"

And his hands went to Will's shoulders, holding on, pushing down - forcing a lowering of Will's eyes in a literal sense if nothing else.

Will resisted him, tilting his head back, baring his throat aggressively, obscenely to Hannibal's gaze.

“You think I’ll let you do this to me, Hannibal? When I’ve seen you crying at the opera like the music could break your heart, and watched you run away from me and… Ah!” Will’s words stopped, ending in a high yelp of pain.

Hannibal had bitten him.

Two edges of sudden, sharp agony, right over the tendon in Will’s neck, and he buckled under it, knees gone weak, all his blood rushing in a tide to his groin and to the site of that perfect, sweet pain.

Will closed his eyes, or they rolled back, either way he couldn’t see anything but he had gripped Hannibal’s arms as he fell, and somehow he was on the floor, on his back on the cold stone floor of Hannibal’s hall and Hannibal on all fours over him, panting like a predator after the chase.

Will put up his hands and braced his legs and wrestled them over, getting above Hannibal only for Hannibal to respond and put Will on his back again. Will drew his hands over his chest protectively, and Hannibal snarled and grabbed his wrists, forcing his arms up and over his head, holding them there.

Will closed his eyes again, overwhelmed, and felt his whole body flex into a sinuous wave of pleasure. He was hard, straining the fabric of the stupid hired trousers, probably visibly so if either of them had bothered to look.

Hannibal didn’t, he just sat down astride Will’s crotch, the pressure of him horrible and wonderful against where Will throbbed, Hannibal’s own erection prodding insistently against Will’s stomach.

“You *were* crying,” Will said viciously, triumphantly, joyously. “I saw you. I saw you. Did you cry for her, for the girl who died? Is that what this is all…?”

Silenced again; Hannibal had leaned in and starting biting and mouthing at Will’s lips and around his jaw, not quite a kiss, nothing so tender; rough and hot and messy.

Will tried to move, struggled under the hold to jerk up in response as he wanted to, but Hannibal's weight trapped him still, fixed at hip and lip and wrists, held in place.

And after a while moving was not important, only being held was, and Will let himself go limp, head falling back and baring his throat again without much conscious thought, arms unresisting as one of Hannibal's hands came away from holding them pinned in order to tilt Will's head as Hannibal desired, to better explore him with his teeth and tongue.

Marking Will out, defining him with every stroke, as before Hannibal had done on paper with his pencil.

Touching, now.

It was strange, and soft, and beautiful. Musical, somehow. Will was still hard, still desperate in a way, and yet he was simultaneously feeling quite calm, the agitation receding into a need that didn't fear not being answered.

It was a little like being able to watch himself from a distance, with only impersonal concern, or perhaps like watching the TV with the sound off, from within a cocoon of blankets, poised on the edge of serenity.

Nothing mattered and everything mattered.

What Hannibal was doing mattered, and all Will had to do was accept it, and he could do that, he knew he could do that for Hannibal, and Hannibal could do this for him.

Will felt a shift in pressure at his groin and moaned loudly, happily.

And then, suddenly, the closeness was receding, Hannibal pulling away – to tease and test Will no doubt, to make him yearn and beg for it.

Will gazed up, then let his eyes drop meekly, as they should, as they must, and tried to hide his contented smile by lowering his chin. Hannibal was punishing him now, he remembered, and they could smile later, and he might be allowed to offer his kisses in turn, then.

"Will?" Hannibal said.

It didn't seem to call for any actual answer on Will's part that he could come up with – he was Will, yes, and he was here and clearly this was so – and he let his eyes close in complete surrender, and released a little shuddery sigh.

Then he found himself colder, heat leeching into free air, and the pressure was lifting altogether and Will opened his eyes again, alarmed, to find Hannibal pulling right away from him and standing up, not touching him any more at all. Will frowned, displeased, increasingly anxious, no longer sure he understood – why, how had he ever been sure of that?

"It was not my place to do this," Hannibal was saying, and Will heard his voice like it was coming from the other end of a long tunnel, and maybe being translated on a time delay – he couldn't think, couldn't pull anything quick from his cotton-wool brain.

Hannibal was too far away, and Will was feeling colder and colder now against the stone floor.

"I apologize," Hannibal continued, all stiff distance. His chest moved rapidly, but his breathing was not allowed to affect his voice. "You may go now, of course. I will not detain you further."

Will blinked, gathering himself into a ball, rocking to gather momentum for a moment and then standing up as best he could, his limbs still shocky and shaky, all pins and needles and strange aches.

Hannibal didn't want him.

Hannibal wanted him to go.

Will could understand that, when he thought it through – when he made the series of sparking, dangerous connections that were all his brain could manage. Something was wrong with his hearing and with his tongue – otherwise he might have spoken, asked a question, but in any case it was taking all his concentration to stay standing upright. He had to wipe the back of his hand over his mouth where there was saliva still drying, and then reach out to pick his coat from the floor and put it back on, even though he didn't remember taking it off.

He had to stand, keep standing, move, keep moving. He had to leave, that was what he'd been told to do.

His neck was sore. He'd been bitten. Only dirty Subs let someone bite them without a pledge collar first.

It had been nice, all the same, but now it wasn't nice any more.

Not the right sort of collar, but it would hide the evidence - Will put up the collar on his coat and shivered again. The cold was going right through him, in his gut, in his bones. He'd been feeling bad earlier, he thought, though the details eluded him even as he tried to grasp them – he couldn't imagine feeling any other way than this, now.

There was a rushing sound in his ears. Hannibal might have said something else - he wasn't sure, and he wasn't going to humiliate himself further by trying to ask for repetition.

Of course, that was it – Hannibal hadn't wanted him earlier either, and Will had been furious and he'd come here like an idiot and been rude, and he'd tried to… he'd wanted…

"Will?" Hannibal was saying, his voice terribly small. He was standing so far away now, and his eyes were darting everywhere, not lowered but not lingering on Will's face either. Perhaps Will was awful to look at. "Will? I should not have attempted such a thing. This was a mistake. Are you alright, Will?"

Hannibal's hands, for some reason, kept lifting and falling. He looked a bit like he was shaking, but the room was shaking and Will's eyes were blurring up.

"I'm fine," Will managed to say, with as much dignity as he could muster. The last thing he needed was to let Hannibal know any more of what was wrong with him.

Will stepped forwards, toward the door, and hitched in his step, wincing. His dick must have been leaking in his pants, because there was a cold and congealing mess there. What a state for Hannibal to see him in. He must find Will disgusting indeed.

"Let me call a taxi for you, Will."

"I think I can manage that, a grown man like me, to hail a cab. At your expense," Will said coldly, plucking the words from the soup of recollection with thankful ease, and opened the door, and walked out.

He made his way somewhat unsteadily down Hannibal's road. His legs were trembling, his muscles feeling shredded like he'd run for miles. It was hard to move, still harder to think, memories coming back in sudden and anxious flashes. His heart was pounding in his throat and reminding him of the grazes on the skin there, something he ought to be alarmed about if he could only remember why. His hands were cold, and it took him a while to think of getting out his gloves again.

He turned the corner, and suddenly bent over double and vomited bile, retching and straining with an empty stomach. He hadn't eaten in so long, hadn't had an interval drink - why hadn't he? If only he could get anything straight in his mind.

He had to go home. He'd been ordered home.

He seemed to be in a perpetual state of holding out his hand and having cabs pass him, but finally one stopped and he gave his address, relieved to find the driver was prepared to go that distance back to Virginia. He was still teetering on the edge of being sick again, and had

to force himself not to retch as he entered the cab interior, which smelt of body odor and cheap pine air-freshener. Will thought of the scented candles back at the apartment, back when he'd lain on a couch and been drawn as a hero, and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering violently.

Finally the cab stopped. Something was supposed to be happening in connection with paying the fare, Will thought, but the need to reach fresh air made everything else secondary and he paid with a bundle of twenties, not asking for change or a receipt.

He'd stiffened up in the cab. It was a long, painful walk along his street to his door.

When he got there, it took a while to get his key into the lock; he pushed and pushed at it, scratching and missing.

Before he'd succeeded, the door was opened from the other side and there was Beverley, a sight that he was too exhausted to question.

"Hey Will! I said get him to buy you an interval drink, not the whole bar! Good night, huh? I just popped round to feed the dogs, looks like a good thing I was here, because... Will?"

Will didn't want to meet her eyes - he shouldn't, he mustn't, he'd got that wrong before and been sent away. He didn't want her there at all, didn't want her seeing this, his shame.

He folded his arms to keep them steady and tried to stop his teeth chattering, wanting to get inside but not feeling able to push past her.

"Th-thank you. That's good. Feeding th-them. I… I'm back now, s-so…"

"Oh fuck," Beverley said firmly. "Oh no. No. No. You are coming with me, mister."

Will stood and shook, blinking at her.

“Follow me,” Beverley repeated more gently, Command soft but strong in her voice.

She took his key from him and locked up his house behind her, then drew his hand into hers and led him down the street.

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Four

Chapter Notes

> **WARNINGS**: In this chapter we earn the 'sexual harassment' warning tag, which includes some brief violence in the context of an unwanted date - please proceed with appropriate caution

“My God, what a douche,” a redheaded woman was saying by Will’s left ear. She was lying all along one side of him as he lay cocooned in fleecy purple blanket that was restricting his movement in a way that was strangely relieving to discover.

Will blinked, eyes still sticky with sleep, and frowned, puzzled, at the light fixture in the ceiling above him. It twisted and coiled, and he didn’t recognize it at all.

“Uh huh, right?” That was Beverley’s voice. She seemed to be on Will’s other side, her arms loosely encircling him.

Will’s mouth tasted of chamomile tea, and something sweet. He saw a packet of fast-dissolving glucose tablets on the coffee table in front of the sofa where they were all sitting.

Will blinked again, and gave up on figuring it out for himself.

“Um? Sorry? Where am I? I don’t remember how I…”

“Oh, hey Will,” Beverley drew back from her hold, but kept one hand on his back, moving in small, soothing circles. “You’re in my house, remember? You with us again?”

Will felt his head swaying. He closed his eyes for a long moment. Something awful was coming back, he could tell, something gathering up in his consciousness like a wave ready to

crash down, but it wasn't on him yet.

"Yes? I'm sorry," he turned to look at the other woman again, "I don't recall meeting…"

"I'm Freddie," said the redhead, and thrust a plastic bucket into Will's hands approximately two seconds before he suddenly realized he had to vomit into it.

"Yeah. I get that too," she said sympathetically when he'd finished, and climbed off the sofa to take the bucket away from him, disappearing out of the door with it to elsewhere in the house.

Beverley's house. That was where he was.

"What's happening?"

Beverley stroked his back some more. "Aftercare."

"What? But I've never needed… I've never had to. I mean. Because I never…"

"Well, congratulations, kid, you dropped. And hard." Beverley gave him a quick, close hug. "But don't think about that now. Don't think about anything just for a while. You want something to eat? I could make pancakes."

"She can literally only make pancakes," Freddie came back into the room, bucket in hand. She set it down by the table again. "There. You need it, take it. Don't hold back. I'd rather not clean your misery off the carpet, flushing it down the toilet is a breeze in comparison."

"Freddie," Beverley said, a slight warning in her voice.

Freddie ducked her head, but gave a smile. She was wearing a crimson turtleneck, and had the sleeves rolled back, displaying several darkened cuff marks on her arms.

Will put his hand to his neck, and winced, and frowned, and winced again with more horror, biting back another surge of nausea. He couldn't remember getting the bruises, not exactly, but images and impressions were coming back in a jumble; himself, hard, rutting up against Hannibal's thigh; being alone, very alone; a flute that subdued monsters; a love surviving trials; words losing meaning on a page as he re-read them; the cold of the window glass under his hands as he leant against the wall of the circle foyer and made a desperate phone-call without thought, without reason…

Feeling awful. Feeling so incredibly, incomparably awful.

Hannibal telling him to leave.

"What time is it now?" Will asked tentatively.

"A bit past one in the morning," Freddie said cheerfully. "Not like Beverley and I keep normal hours anyway, not with our jobs. We might have got to have sex if you weren't here, but, whatever." She shrugged. Will couldn't place whether she was being charmingly frank or saccharine in bitchiness, and blinked at her for a while, his vision going in and out of focus. His head was pounding.

Will heard a door opening behind him, and twitched round, startled, instantly afraid of whom he might see coming through it, but it was Beverley. Evidently she'd left the house for a short while, because it was the front door she was coming through, and she was not alone.

"There you go," Beverley said, and there was the sound of the scrabbling of claws on laminate flooring. "You ready to reassure this guy you're still with him?" Whether Beverley was addressing Will or Malteaser wasn't clear.

Malteaser bounded over, but when he got close to the sofa he stopped, whining a little, and poked Will's knee with his nose.

“I’m OK, buddy,” Will said, managing a smile, and reached out to scoop him up into his lap. Malteaser started licking his face, and for the first time in what felt like days, Will could actually feel a thin thread of wellbeing coil through him. Smiling hurt, though. Everything hurt, aching like he had the ‘flu, like he’d been wrung out and slapped down and left to dry in the cold.

“Did we decide what we’re eating?” Beverley asked.

Freddie sat down on an armchair that matched the sofa and curled her legs up under her. She was wearing knitted slipper boots with pompoms on. “Something with a fuckton of carbs.”

“Freddie.” Beverley walked over to the chair, putting out her hand. After a moment, Freddie, frowning resentfully, got out of the chair and knelt for a moment, her head bent so her lips could kiss Beverley’s fingers.

Beverley spoke in a voice low but firm: “He needed attention. You will get attention later. The attention you get may be enjoyable for you, or not, that is my decision. There is no need to provoke me.”

Will tensed, wondering what he should do – where he should go – if this turned into a fight, but when Freddie looked up again she was smiling, her body language looser and easier, and she leant in quite meekly for a proper kiss, which Beverley gave without further comment. Then Freddie was back in her chair, and Beverley was on the other side of the room fishing takeout leaflets out of a drawer, and they both seemed entirely calm about the situation.

Will dug his fingers through Malteaser’s fluff, and sighed a little, and watched another roll of memories flash through the back of his mind, and groaned.

“You can’t have any more Tylenol yet,” Beverley said, from the kitchen island where she was sorting leaflets into three different stacks. “Hang in there a bit longer, I know it hurts.”

“I’m sorry,” Will said, and gasped, starting to breath too fast – it was coming, he couldn’t stop it – “I think I’m going to…” and the tears burst from his eyes sudden and terrible, he was choked and coughing, everything congested and disgusting too fast to seem real.

“Yeah, OK,” Beverley was back at his side, rubbing between his shoulder blades. “It’s OK. You’re doing good. This is what happens. It’s OK. Good job, Will. This is what you need, keep at it, good, you’re doing so good.”

Malteaser tried to lick at his face some more, and Will pressed into Beverley’s shoulder and the warmth of her embrace, and felt Freddie coming to flank him, her slim, cool hands with their perfect purple marks, and shook uncontrollably and hated everything.

- - -

Will hadn’t been able to cope with being left alone on Beverley’s couch to sleep, even with Malteaser for company. He would have tried to stick it out – he wished that they would have let him, even if it meant freaking and shivering through the small hours and feeling awful again, he would rather have done that than get into bed with them.

But Beverley clearly wasn’t going to cope either, with being somewhere else whilst Will was alone, and Freddie said as far as she was concerned she just wanted to go to sleep, fuck, she didn’t care who she had to lie next to, and so although Freddie was clearly owed – and needing - a session, and although Beverley’s bed was not generously sized and Will felt almost as much discomfort from the intimacy as the solitude, they were eventually all tucked up together – Will in one of Beverley’s old boyfriend’s old sweatshirts – just as the alarm switched over to three a.m.

Will slept in fits and starts, waking up alternately afraid and aroused, heart pounding and eyes staring into the dark to ground himself before the scent of Beverley’s fabric softener would catch, and convince him he didn’t have to run.

The next morning Beverley stood over him while he called in sick, fed him pancakes with syrup and butter and insisted on going to do a grocery shop for him before she would let him back to his own house.

“I didn’t… I didn’t ask her to do any of this, I mean… I really appreciate it.” Will said helplessly to Freddie, meaning *It’s not fair for you to hate me, I don’t want your Dom’s attention, I am going to scream soon,* after Beverley had set off in her car to the store, promising to be less than half an hour.

“Yeah, no, this is upsetting her pretty bad,” Freddie said, licking yoghurt off her spoon. She was cross-legged in her armchair, managing to work on a laptop and eat at the same time. She was a freelance journalist, Will had learnt, and Beverley worked for the local police department as a forensic examiner but was on leave for a research paper.

“But I’m not – I’m not anything to do with her. I’m not her problem. She didn’t do this to me.” Will stopped, swallowing hard against the bile rising in his throat. He kept sort of forgetting what had happened, and then getting slammed sideways with the details again.

He’d been bitten. No one had said the words, but he knew it, and he knew from the way Beverley had looked when she’d offered him arnica cream for his bruises that she’d noticed.

He hadn’t checked his mobile yet – he’d phoned the university from Beverley’s landline. He probably ought to. The mere thought made his skin crawl.

“You’re a Sub who got dropped, and she’s the nearest Dom, and her alignment instincts skew hard to care-taking, in case you missed that.” Freddie put away another spoon of yoghurt. “Doms get vulnerable too, you know, just in an opposite sort of way.”

“Yeah?” Will fiddled with the stitching of the seam along the edge of the blanket he’d been re-wrapped in. “How… How would you know if a Dom was having trouble navigating all this stuff?”

“Dude. Whoever dropped you? Was a paramount dick,” Freddie pointed her spoon at him. “Don’t even start thinking anything else. You can see how Beverley is? Any decent Dom would at least check in on you after sending you into the night in the state you were in.”

Will unwrapped himself and went shakily over to where his jacket was hanging by the door. He felt in the pockets for his phone and got it out.

There were no missed calls, no voicemails, and no new messages.

Putting it back, he bit his lip and tried to affect a casual attitude.

“So, Freddie, what are you working on at the moment?”

She twisted her laptop round so he could see the screen, most of the which was occupied by a photograph of a woman holding up her hand against the camera, clearly having been found by several photographers on the street.

“Alex Moore,” said Freddie. “She’s a teacher in North Carolina, and she failed a health board, claimed that she should be recognized as Indeterminately Aligned and allowed to function as a Dom and Sub.”

“A Switch?” Will blinked, feeling suddenly hot.

“Yeah, we don’t use that word so much now.” Freddie turned her laptop back round and starting typing again. “Anyway, she chose to take the school board to court over her suspension, and now she’s basically unemployable. So, hey, it could be worse, right?”

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Will had been desperate to get back to his own house and – as he planned it – to do something else and put all of the day and night before behind him, but he found that every time he got up to do something he was soon mindlessly wandering back to curl up under a rug on the sofa again, with the addition, here, of being climbed on and around by three anxious dogs.

It was like the first few days after stomach flu, except with the addition of toe-curlingly embarrassing flashbacks every hour or so.

He had no excuse for letting a Dom screw him up. He'd never been starry-eyed, never bought the fairy-tale. He'd gone into the situation with Hannibal determined to keep things straightforward, and following Hannibal home the night before had been a decision that was never going to lead anywhere good – and that part of the evening, at least, was clear in his mind; the humiliation of being ignored and his stupid, dramatic over-reaction, the thing that had opened the crack in his armor.

Eventually, Will managed the sustained task of heating a can of baked beans and making toast, and thought he had cobbled together more or less the timeline of the night before.

His own actions he couldn't rationally account for. He'd wanted to do what he did at the time, remembered nothing but enthusiasm on his part, but unpicking that, now, when it all seemed like the most regrettable incident of his life, was impossible.

Hannibal had been into it, Will decided, for a given value of 'into'. He'd wanted something from Will, and then suddenly had wanted something else. Will could only assume he'd been satisfied with whatever emotional game he'd been playing, whatever gratification he'd been seeking from it all.

Will's mobile stayed quiet for the rest of the day – except, that was, for two fairly restrained check-in texts from Beverley.

Will settled in to sleep on his couch on Thursday night, which the dogs thought was the best idea in the history of humanity, trying to fix on some documentary on the TV about cold chain vaccines while he waited to drop off, rather than think the whole fucking mess through any more times.

Maybe Hannibal was just a paramount dick.

Sometime in the small hours, Will woke up with a start, still panting, from a dream of a dark room and a huge, cold bed and trembling. There'd been small bronze statues ringed around, and watching, and cackling in demon masks as on the bed, the Queen of the Night stuck a knife into Hannibal's neck, screaming her aria – a pattern of ideas easy to perceive in the dream, falling apart as he sifted them.

“Hannibal Lecter is perfectly fine,” Will said, aloud, to make himself hear it. One of the dogs whuffed back. “Hannibal is fine. He is fine without me. He is absolutely fucking fine.”

And probably laughing it off, even now. Well, maybe not right now three a.m. now, but probably Hannibal had spent *his* morning-after joking with other hospital staff and telling his surgeon buddies about the complete train-wreck of a Sub he’d narrowly avoided hitting third base with.

Briefly energized with anger, Will stumbled to the toilet and then through to his actual bed, and collapsed again, heart pounding, sweating into the sheets.

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Friday, back at work, Will saw Jack coming towards him along a hallway and ducked into a lift, and wound up having to take a fifteen-minute detour via the library that made him late for his class.

His mobile – apart from Beverley – stayed blank. There was nothing in his work or personal email and no message at the inbox for his profile on the Federal Alignment Matching website, which technically would be forwarded to email anyway but could sometimes get stuck in spam filters.

He threw two students out of one lecture for talking at the back, and broke his office chair when he got stuck trying to readjust it.

That evening he switched on a music TV channel playing angry alt rock songs he remembered from his undergraduate years, and stood up at his kitchen counter and made fish pie from scratch, potato peeling and all, and boxed up and froze his leftovers to eat later. He ironed his shirts and cleaned his living room and had a go at the pinkish mold in his bathroom with bleach and a toothbrush.

He went to sleep in his bed, teeth cleaned, alarm set, at half past eleven.

And woke up at half past three in the morning, scrabbling at his neck against hands that weren't there, reaching out to wrestle with a body with no form, lifting his hips, seeking, desperate, an orgasm that had been stampeding upon him drifting away with every blink and breath of cold, conscious air.

He didn't want to sleep again, after that, and when he looked around his bedroom floor for something – anything – to read, he wound up excavating a huge pile in one corner, at the bottom of which was a battered folder he'd almost forgotten about.

His notes on the Nurizon paper.

Sitting back on his heels, Will dropped his head, closing his eyes for a moment.

If his compass hadn't been great before, he was even more lost now.

- - -

"I see here that you list your last session with a Dom as November 9th?" The man behind the table stroked a finger over the fledgling moustache on his upper lip as he spoke. Will had been in a room with the man for barely ten minutes, and that habit was really starting to set him on edge now.

"No sessions since?" the man – Dr Bretton – continued. "That was getting on for a month ago – twenty-six days now?"

Bretton and another Dom - a woman, Dr Kuli – had arrived at the university today as the Independent Alignment Health Review Board for all the applicants for the Professorship. Will was last candidate in – *if you're scheduled then, is there some hope you'll be on time?* had been Jack's comment on it.

Avoiding Jack had only worked for about a week before Jack had cornered him in Will's office. Jack hadn't needed to be told how badly things had gone wrong with the sessions, he'd seemed to have figured that out for himself, for which at least Will was grateful. All Jack had said on the topic was that, fortunately, with the interviews set for the date they were, Will should still be within the boundaries of acceptable time gaps between sessions to pass muster. Then he'd gone on to talking about other aspects of the application process, and handed Will a stack of reading on some topics he'd apparently heard might come up at the academic interview.

It was looking, though, like Jack's assessment of 'acceptable time gap' was not the health board's.

Now, with the query before him, Will shrugged. It seemed the safest reply, given that clearly he hadn't had other sessions or he'd have put them on his form, and Dr Bretton had to know that. He could say he had one coming up tonight or at the weekend, he supposed, but why should he have to lie? In any case, they might check, and you needed two people to sign off.

If Jack had known enough about his recent personal life, he would probably have told Will to stretch and fake some kind of 'session' out of all the times Beverley had come over to 'say Hi to Malteaser' and bring him pies she'd apparently found on buy-one-get-one-free and didn't really want two of. Will was starting to wonder if this mixture of grateful affection and intense irritation about the same person was how it felt for people with siblings.

He wondered if either of the panel had at least noticed the last of the fading bruises from the night of the opera disaster on his neck. They were the first thing he noticed about himself, still, when he looked in his bathroom mirror in the morning, but probably barely noticeable, really, by now. He'd not tested it out on anyone – he'd been keeping hidden under scarves and rollnecks – but today, for this assessment, he'd left the scarf in his jacket pocket and kept his skin bare. A Sub with teethmarks, generally speaking, had something serious going on, and it would be a way to claw back one useful thing from Hannibal fucking Lecter.

He hadn't expected to care in the slightest about the marks being seen. Now, sitting under scrutiny, he felt uncomfortable – not ashamed but irritated. These people, his mind wanted to insist, didn't deserve to see this part of him, had never earned the right.

As if such a right existed and there was anyone to whom he'd give it.

“My work has had to come first just lately,” Will said, into the persisting silence, the self-conscious phrasing too obvious. He cleared his throat.

Dr Kuli raised her eyebrow and started writing on her pad again. “And you are still registered for Alignment Matching?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Have you been sent any recent matches?”

Will swallowed, trying to keep his breathing even. The thought of another Dom was enough to make his skin crawl, but that wasn’t what she’d asked – he could be very precisely truthful.

“No more matches recently, but I check my email regularly. I have to, working here, obviously,” Will tried to smile. It probably came off looking worse than if he’d stayed blank.

“Well,” she gave a bright, insincere grin. “I think that’s everything. David?”

Dr Bretton folded his arms. His smile was broader and even harder to take. “No more questions from me.”

Will stood up to leave, steeling himself to shake hands if they offered. Neither reached out, though, which might be a subconscious sign they considered him partnered, if they were old-fashioned enough.

That should have been cheering.

Dr Kuli left first, and immediately, scurrying out of the door with a giant tablet phone to her ear, already talking.

“Dr Graham?” Bretton said, as Will was turning to follow her.

Will turned back, gritting his teeth.

“Yes?”

“You know, these health review boards that attach to job applications are such a bad idea,” Bretton gave a short laugh and made a show of ducking his head – unthreatening, casual.

Will tensed.

“I mean, after all,” Bretton continued, “so many Submissives who otherwise resist a traditional life structure find partners just so they can pass these boards, and a lot of the time that means partners not best suited them, you know?”

He was getting closer now; his eyes kept drifting to Will’s neck. His tongue pushed out between his lips, smearing wetly.

“I know you would never do such a thing, Dr Graham. I know you just want to maintain your health like a responsible adult, and of course, as you know, the current guidelines – the guidelines I must abide by – recommend session intervals of not greater than twenty-eight days, and you’re sailing pretty close to the wind now…” Bretton put out a hand and squeezed down on Will’s shoulder, one finger lifting up to brush over the bare skin of Will’s throat.

Revulsion rolled through Will’s body too violently to allow conscious thought.

Violently, he twisted away, full of rage, ready to kick and punch and bite if he had to.

This Dom did not deserve to touch him.

It was the reaction – honestly – that he had always expected to have to any Dom, that he had fully expected to have to Hannibal, once, before he'd been lulled into forgetting to keep his guard up.

And didn't that thought fuel his fury?

"What," he asked, clearly and distinctly, "was that?" He'd drawn back instinctively, but he arrested the motion and reversed it, storming back into Bretton's space.

Bretton's eyes widened, and he stepped away, one hand to his chest as if grievously offended.

"Dr Graham! I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about! And there is no need whatsoever to use that kind of language. I can only conclude that whatever your session Dom did participate in with you to help you pass this board, it was facile and lax in the extreme."

Will held back from punching him in the face, just.

If he got violent he'd be labeled unbalanced, that much was for sure. Because if a Sub hit a Dom there had to be something wrong, and it was probably with the Sub, because that behavior was just unnatural, wasn't it? He could hear the gossip already.

"Well," Bretton sniffed and straightened his tie. "No doubt someone has been indulging you, but you're dealing with the real wide world now, and if I were you I'd be cautious to whom I repeated ridiculous statements like that. My job is to *assess* you and ensure your health and wellbeing, and everything I have done today has been with that in mind."

Whatever best described the other end of the scale from subtle, Bretton had hit it with that emphasis on 'assess'. He held all the power in this situation – as a Dom, as a Dom in an agency run by Doms and simply as the person whose word stood between Will and the job he wanted – that he deserved, had worked for. And Bretton knew it.

You never heard of complaints getting made by Subs against Alignment Health Boards and making it through court. Once in a blue moon, maybe – and then the newspapers would be full of ‘think pieces’ by people who didn’t seem qualified to claim they had two brain cells to rub together, talking about whether it was fair to allow some Dom’s reputation to get ruined because of the allegations of one Sub.

Will sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Don’t tell me – and now you’re suddenly going to have serious doubts about my ability to pass this assessment?”

It wasn’t meant as a backing down, but perhaps Bretton had been expecting one, because he paused and folded his arms, regaining some poise.

“I shall have, of course, to consult with my colleague. Your behavior has hardly been what I would call ideal functioning, but perhaps I startled you, by accident? Would you say that my… natural friendliness and willingness to help temporarily alarmed you and lead you to misunderstand the situation?”

Will stared at him.

He knew a command to kneel when he heard it.

And when he heard it, he realized where he’d been hearing it before.

He’d made such a production out of resisting any impositions by a Dom on his life – and much good that had done him anyway – but he’d never thought how he was being commanded just as forcefully and implacably by all the strictures on his existence that made him have to clear hoop after hoop.

Hannibal Lecter might have screwed him over three weeks ago, but he’d been taking it every other way without complaining all along.

Bretton was watching him, waiting for his response, a slight smirk growing on his face as he followed Will figuring it out.

He knew that Will would have to roll over and give in over this, just as Chilton had known he'd do it for CETApharm, not because of choice or consent or inclination, but because the cards had never been stacked to play out any other way.

He was out of options.

If he didn't get this job, and tenure, he'd be without a job in months, maybe weeks. Jack wouldn't be pleased, might offer good references, a few phone calls to other people, but Jack wouldn't being paying his bills or his rent.

And if Will kicked up a fuss over this assessment, that would be just as bad as failing – everything would get delayed, and in the meantime the job would disappear.

"Well?" Bretton cocked his head to one side, and smoothed his fingers, again, over his ridiculous moustache.

Will bit the inside of his cheek, hard. Then he took a deep breath, and dropped his head down a little, speaking through clenched teeth.

"I suppose that your natural friendliness and willingness to help temporarily alarmed me and lead me to misunderstand the situation, Dr Bretton."

"So glad we've sorted that out." Bretton smirked, and gave Will a look up and down. "You know, I feel that perhaps we should really work out our interpersonal issues further. I've been invited to a gathering tonight in Washington DC, it's plus one. You could join me."

Will couldn't help looking up and staring. "I… don't scrub up well. And at the last minute? Wouldn't I be pushing aside your usual partner?"

He could see it, though, the delight that Bretton was taking in wielding this power. The need to keep exercising it, the way that Will's distaste only made it sweeter.

"There's a wonderful parlor I use – *Submergé* - they're franchised across five states, they've got a premises in Washington, they can fit you up." Bretton leered at him again. "I'll pay, of course."

Will breathed heavily for a moment, trying to see a way out that would leave him any hope of keeping his job.

There wasn't one.

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The 'parlor' Bretton had spoken of was a place outwardly glamorous and with all the comfort within of a dog grooming facility crossed with a high-class brothel. The walls were covered in framed photos of Subs, mostly in sultry poses but sometimes with their arms round the 'groomers', smiling theatrically or blowing kisses in gratitude. *OMG Best Makeover Ever* was written on the bottom of one picture, with a smiley face.

There was a case of collars for hire near the shop window, suits and dresses on a rack at the back with a small changing room, and various bits of beauty salon with a small kitchen and a large bathroom with shower stalls tacked on. It was all about *'Getting Ready for Them'* according to the slogan on the wall, and it made Will feel queasy just to be there.

Whether figuring that he'd only push Will so far before he snapped, or simply because he didn't actually want his company, Bretton had left Will to drive to Washington himself. An 'accident' on the road or a terrible wrong turning had occurred to him, but he had a feeling Bretton would follow it up.

He needed to formulate a plan that would get him out of this evening without having to do something he really couldn't stand, and yet leave him every bit of leverage he needed for

getting that assessment ticked off.

He'd thought about it all through the drive down, was thinking about it now as a young Sub with elaborate nail art washed his hair – and yeah, Hannibal's touch was the still the only one he'd ever had to his head that hadn't set his teeth on edge - and another moisturized his hands.

But he'd yet to come up with anything.

"I think the blue suit," one woman was saying to another behind him, and then Will heard the phone ringing.

"Oh yes," a man – another Sub, that was half of what stank about it, to Will, all these Subs playing along with this script together – "yes Dr Bretton, he's about a half an hour away from done. You're sending a cab? Well aren't you sweet. Goodbye."

The Sub working on Will's hands smiled up at him slightly. "Bretton's an OK guy," he said, quietly. "He doesn't like anything crazy, just get on your knees once and you're sorted pretty much." He cleared his throat and spoke even more softly. "Hair trigger."

"Good to know," Will said, and clenched his jaw.

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By the time the cab with Bretton had pulled up outside the parlor, Will was sleek and primped and prepared in almost every way possible.

He'd turned down the basket of lube sachets he'd been offered. That had been an attempt at drawing a line in the sand, a promise to himself of where the evening would not go, of the point to which he would not be pushed.

But then, he'd almost slept with Hannibal. And all that clusterfuck had, in the end, been in the cause of getting the job promotion.

And if Hannibal had actually wanted him, that night after the opera, what then? Might they still be seeing each other? The thought infuriated him now, but it would have made him able to pass today's assessment with unarguable certainty, without weakness or ambiguity for Bretton to insinuate himself into.

When Will stepped out from the parlor's sultry warmth to the pavement, he found Bretton had got out of the cab and was holding the door open for him, smirk stretching his moustache.

Will wanted to spit in his face.

But it still didn't touch the core of rage that thinking about Hannibal fired in him.

The drive from the parlor to the party venue took about half an hour. Bretton filled this with a monologue about all the important people that he knew and that they would meet, and Will gladly tuned it out, looking out of the car window and nodding occasionally, feeling the oily rub of his trousers against his lotion-heavy skin with acute discomfort.

Leaving the cab, outside an imposing building with a neo-Grecian façade and a wide flight of steps leading up to the actual doors, Will saw that, as unwanted as his hours in the parlor had been, unwarranted they were not. This was high society, and he could pass amongst it now as much as he'd stuck out like a sore thumb back at the opera house, back in that ball of memories he was never unpacking again.

The Prescott-Hawkes Charitable Foundation Gala, a sign near the steps read, and the whole scene looked like something off the TV, like the first scene in a film about diamond robberies. A lot of the Subs were wearing expensive collar jewelry in leather or precious metals, sometimes with arm cuffs to match, in one or two cases with a light chain linking the bindings together worn by the truly daring. Some of the Doms, in contrast, had thick 'ropes' of woven metals dangling from their belt loops – an old-fashioned affectation and in Will's opinion a ridiculous, if not downright unpleasant one.

Bretton, naturally, was wearing a belt-rope.

Will looked down the street, vaguely thinking of escape, and found Bretton calling his attention back by actually *tutting* at him, and then gesturing that Will was to climb the red-carpeted stairs at his side.

Will gritted his teeth and kept his head down.

Inside the entrance hall, what seemed like a huge number of people were milling around, eating and drinking as waiting staff scurried around after them with trays.

Bretton lead the way towards one group, and started up a conversation with much shaking of hands and exclamation. Will stayed meekly at his side and slightly behind him, trying to tell himself that not having to maintain a flow of conversation with these people was at least slightly worth the humiliation of keeping his place.

He was pretty confident that Bretton hadn't brought him here for his brain. He doubted looks had factored into it much either, even if you assumed he had any, which he'd never believed.

Bretton wanted him here because if Bretton wanted him here, here Will had to be. That was the game. That was the gratification.

Nonetheless, after that particular collection of party-goers had moved on, Bretton turned round and gave a displeased sigh in Will's direction, his hands on his hips and perhaps purposefully showing off his stupid belt-rope.

"I thought I could get some conversation out of an assistant professor, at least."

Will couldn't make himself smile, even sarcastically. "What do you want me to say? Should I talk about how my day went?"

Bretton narrowed his eyes. “Not the time or the place for silly attempts at humor, Will.”

It was the first time he’d used Will’s first name, and Will’s lip curled at the sound, even without the clumsy attempt at Chastisement that had been pushed into the tone alongside it.

Another few people came their way, and started talking about the building they were in, which was a topic that didn’t make Will actively angrier at least, and that much he was prepared to be grateful for at this point.

“Don’t you just love Art Deco?” one female Dom was saying, with a sigh. “The thirties was such a great time to be alive!”

Will thought biting his tongue and refraining from any answer to that particular opinion counted as an achievement.

“Anyway, we’ve not met,” the woman smiled more broadly. “What brings you here with our good Dr Bretton? I should warn you, I’m onto him, his bachelor ways, he’s such a heartbreaker. I want him to settle down and I’m not above conscripting you to my cause!” She giggled, and Will bit his tongue again, hard.

“Will is a work colleague,” Bretton said to her, smoothly seguing in from the conversation he’d been having with someone else. “Honestly he’s here as a favor to me.” He give a self-deprecating laugh.

“A favor any nice Sub would be glad to offer, wouldn’t you say?” The woman winked and nudged Will with her elbow, making him stumble back at the contact, which he might have been able to handle if he’d not spent all those hours getting pawed at back at the parlor or felt any safety in being near Bretton now.

“It’s nothing,” Will mumbled. “Like he said, just work.” If that was the line Bretton was going with, maybe this wouldn’t be so awful after all. Well, still awful, but a marathon he could complete.

“I am so grateful to Will, of course,” Bretton said. He smiled. “It is so nice, don’t you think, when people help each other out in getting what they need?”

And he put his hand lightly at the bottom of Will’s neck, his fingertips blunt and sticky on Will’s skin.

The Dom clapped her hands together and beamed. “Oh God, that’s too cute. I wish I were ten years younger! This is what I mean, you know?” she said, now addressing another Dom next to her, picking up some other conversational thread.

Will was breathing in a very, very controlled way.

“Take your hand off me,” Will said, his voice barely audible.

“We need to show him this, show him what he’s really missing out on, where is he?” the female Dom was continuing.

“Take your hand away,” Will said again. He wasn’t hearing much anymore except for his blood pounding, or aware of much beyond the snakelike gaze of Bretton’s eyes.

“Now, now,” Bretton was saying, and he licked his lips, tongue smearing wetly. He tapped his fingers against the knobs of Will’s spine. “Let’s not forget ourselves.”

“Ah! There he is, I’ve spotted him,Beatrice, go get him over here!”

“I don’t care if you get me sacked from my job, evicted from my house and expelled from the country.” Will could feel the truth of it in every nerve as he spoke. “I could bear any of that more easily than your slimy hands on me. Now move, or I will break your fucking fingers.”

He’d been ready for being shouted at, ready for the loss of all hope for his job, ready for public humiliation, but he gasped in shock as Bretton’s response to his words was to tighten

his grip on Will's neck, hard, squeezing to the point of choking him.

Will was falling down to his knees, being pushed, blinking against spots in his vision, trying to get his hands up to fight back and the worst part was maybe how much of a relief it was because this was desperate, now, and he could claw back, fight, *attack* now and…

"What is the meaning of this?" a voice demanded, loudly, coming up from behind where Will was collapsing.

Angular. Cold. Projecting Command clean through the room, so that the talking died away as people stopped to listen.

Will blinked, seeing clearly again. Bretton's grip had suddenly slackened and Will could get upright again, stumbling as he turned around.

He knew who he was going to see, but that didn't make it any easier.

"Hannibal," Will said, and choked, and cleared his throat, and looked around the room, because honestly running away seemed as likely to save his dignity as anything else he could possibly do about this nightmare.

"Dr Lecter," he heard Bretton gasping.

Will shifted his attention, and saw Bretton had gone almost completely white, before flushing deep red, clearly afraid.

Will took half a second to pray that he was reading this right.

And dropped to his knees at Hannibal's feet.

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Five

“Will,” Hannibal said, the word falling into the air between them like molasses into water.

His face scarcely moved, but the sound of Will’s name seemed to last a while, and travel through several possible pitches of feeling.

Will bowed his head, submitting even further, hoping desperately.

Around them, the murmur of the assembled crowd was rising, some eagerly questioning whilst others tried to hush them so they could hear what happened next. People kept repeating Hannibal’s name, peppered with exclamation marks.

At the end of the day, Will was a Sub they didn’t know, and only doing what Subs did.

But Hannibal, here, was recognized. These people were staring at Hannibal. All eyes on him, and on his private life, in precisely the way that Will knew he had always striven so hard to avoid.

Will was conscious, in that moment, that if he’d set out to hurt Hannibal in revenge for what had happened after the opera, he probably couldn’t have planned anything better than this.

And he could complete it now. He could throw in some well chosen words, say something about Hannibal’s prowess or his proclivities, say anything personal, really, and ruin Hannibal’s evening and if he was lucky do much worse than that.

But Bretton was still gasping like a landed fish, and Will needed many things, and he couldn’t live off the satisfaction of hurting Hannibal alone

Will thought of Hannibal's hand on his head, the night he'd been drawn, and of the tremble there had been in it.

He bent further forwards, head going low, the back of his neck showing.

"Hannibal, please, I would prefer not to talk about this here," he said, and tried to make his voice Pleading.

He'd never done that since the messing about practicing tonals when he'd been a teenager, when he and a bunch of other Subs had tried the voices on each other and usually burst out laughing well before they achieved anything. He'd thought he wouldn't be able to pull if off now, given how he didn't exactly feel very polite.

Hannibal's face, of course, was mask-like, but Will, watching from under his lashes, saw him swallow, hard.

Maybe it had worked because Will really was pleading – not for what he'd actually said, but hard as hell for what he needed; Hannibal's protection, Hannibal's power to get him out of here in one piece.

And it really had worked – some of the Doms around them in the crowd were actually sighing in response, or making cutesy noises.

A Sub on his knees was a Sub everyone loved, after all.

Will kept his breathing steady. He'd offered Hannibal a retreat with dignity; Hannibal would naturally take it, regardless of any other thoughts or feelings about Will or anything else. This plan might not work more than another five minutes, but that might be all he needed to convince Bretton that filing a report rubbishing the effectiveness of Will's session Dom was not such a good idea.

He'd have to figure out how Bretton knew Hannibal. Presumably their professional lives overlapped. He'd thought Bretton's title was an academic qualification, but he might be a practicing physician of some sort. Perhaps even Hannibal's junior – that would be almost perfect.

There was another stretching silence, and then Hannibal cleared his throat and said, quite calmly. "You will come outside with me, Will."

The Command in his voice was as lightly placed as the dusting of sugar on cake, and Will was happy to let himself shiver a little under it.

He kept his eyes down as he followed Hannibal to the revolving doors leading back out of the entrance hall, and away from the stunned quiet they had caused to develop there, emerging into the cold air where others, oblivious, were still standing around chatting and smoking and intent on their own concerns.

"We shall be followed by at least some of our audience imminently, I suspect," Hannibal was saying, and Will turned to look at him, letting the reflexive anger that had flared up the moment their eyes met wash unhindered over his body, trying to gather strength from it and give nothing of it away.

"Do you merely wish to take your leave at once," Hannibal was continuing, "or is there some other matter you will allow me to assist you with?" He looked back at the doors as though a request to go and punch Bretton in the face was more or less exactly what he was hoping for.

Yes, Hannibal was rattled. It wouldn't show to most people, but Will was prepared to bet on it. Which indeed, he was going to have to.

"I didn't want to be here with him," Will said, and looked back to where they'd left Bretton.

That statement was the truth if ever anything was.

And then, having waited a moment, having paused and licked his lower lip like he was shy of saying it: “I didn’t know that you would be here tonight, though.”

He looked up, held Hannibal’s gaze. He felt breathless and too warm, and awkward and inelegant and unnecessary, but he knew he’d been scrubbed up to his best tonight - he’d been aware of the whole process with the hideous clarity of getting teeth pulled without gas, after all - and he was never going to have a better shot at this.

“You would have avoided me?” Hannibal nodded slightly. His voice was unyielding as stone. “Yes, yes of course. Indeed, I would have avoided coming here tonight if I’d known this meeting would occur. I will no longer importune you.” He made as if to start walking away.

Now came the gamble. But, really, Will had nothing to lose. He’d gain nothing by saving his dignity with Hannibal now, either. This was a chip he couldn’t cash, only play, and with it came the possibility of rescuing back all he had lost in the past couple of hours.

“I’d like to get away from all this nonsense,” Will said quickly, halting Hannibal’s departure. When Hannibal turned, Will gestured back at the streams of people still making their way to the gala. His voice was self-consciously casual, and purposefully so. “But I wouldn’t mind your company, wherever I’m going.”

Hannibal was staring at him again. He could control the muscles of his face, but not the light in his eyes, and he looked quite amazed – surprised in a way Will couldn’t quite understand, and didn’t intend to try to.

Will kept a steady gaze back. He wasn’t going to play this all missivine and coy, that had been for the benefit of the room he’d left, not Hannibal. Hannibal wouldn’t be taken in by that for a second, wouldn’t get distracted in the contemplation of his own self-image like Bretton had.

No, for Will to get what he wanted from Hannibal, he’d have to play the game that didn’t look like it was being played at all.

So he didn't touch his neck, where near-vanished bruises covered over with the parlor's concealer make-up had started a strange phantom ache, and he didn't sigh or lick his lips again or let his pose slide open. He just looked back, as if he had nothing to hide, as if nothing rode on this.

"Would you perhaps care, then, for a cup of coffee?" Hannibal asked him, with near-perfect composure regained.

The satisfaction, the triumph Will felt at the moment was splendid indeed.

"Sure." He nodded. "We should do that."

And then on the heels of the pleasure came dismay, and he couldn't quite parse why. He felt like he'd gone to take a step and found the ground coming away under his feet, like he confidently turned a steering wheel only to have it break off in his hand.

He frowned, blinked, tried to get it all back under control.

"Shall we?" Hannibal was asking, one eyebrow raised.

Will took a deep breath and nodded. He'd never exactly been successful at flirtation, at interaction with the opposite alignment on any level, and that was all this confusion was, undoubtedly; the amazement of success.

"Lead the way," Will said, and nodded.

He didn't try and take Hannibal's arm – too much, too clumsy – but fell into step with him along the pavement as they crunched salt and slush under the soles of their shoes. Will didn't have a coat, but Hannibal hadn't gone back to retrieve his from the cloakroom either, so hopefully a long walk was not in prospect. It was a clear, cold night, starry above the purple haze of the light pollution, and every now and again a cab zipped by with a window rolled down letting spill a blast of music and a waft of leaden fumes.

“Have you decided to try a new cologne?” Hannibal asked, after a while.

“An unsuccessful experiment,” Will told him, as offhandedly as he could. The parlor had sprayed all kinds of things at him and on him, and thinking about it made him aware again of the patina of oil on the skin of his stomach and thighs, the smoothness of his hands.

An image of sliding his fingers through Hannibal’s hair and wiping the oil away on it, rough and uncaring, slid through his brain and made him catch his breath.

He frowned, making himself concentrate.

“We never talked about the opera,” Will said carefully, and was glad, seeing Hannibal stiffen momentarily, that he’d been the one to deploy that reference as a first strike. He smiled as though, to him, the association was merely polite. “I was going to ask you to explain more about the story – it seemed very strange, like a fairytale, but when I broke it down, not one I was familiar with.”

Hannibal cleared his throat and began in a calm, lecturing voice: “Mozart is believed to have been influenced by his membership of the Freemasons. Much of the symbolism and moral code of *Die Zauberflöte* relates to that of Masonic ritual and belief.”

“I was thinking more about the characters. Pamina, for example, getting taken away from her mother by Sarastro – was he meant to be her father? It seemed like that was the logical conclusion, somehow, but I don’t remember anyone actually saying so. Singing so, I suppose,” Will added, with a slight laugh.

Hannibal’s mouth twitched. “No one said so, or indeed sang so. It is not in the libretto, although you are not the first to make such a leap of intuition.”

“So Sarastro just randomly wanted to protect her? It’s just so unusual, that the hero goes to rescue the heroine and finds she’s already been rescued, basically. And then,” Will shrugged,

“it’s frankly even more unusual in that setting, where she’s a Dom. A Dom rescuing a Dom like that is not a story you ever see, really.”

“Would you say? Many action thriller films, I believe, have such a subplot.”

“Oh sure, one buddy rescuing another, that can happen. But that’s not about helplessness, not helplessness like Pamina faced – I mean that’s as stereotypical a Sub role as you could find, and they just translated a Dom into it for that Raverat setting thing? I can see why people got antsy about it all.”

“Do you suppose that inhabiting Dominant alignment precludes the need for rescuing, Will?”

Something in Hannibal’s gaze made Will drop his own. He cleared his throat.

“This is the first time I’ve been in DC in years,” he said, aware that he was changing the subject with all the subtlety of kicking a jukebox to skip a track. “Do you come here much? I assume that the charity back there has something to do with you?”

“The foundation supports some of my work with patients, yes.” Hannibal smiled slightly and went on into a succinct and really quite interesting explanation of neo-adjuvant therapies he had recently been trialing.

That managed to get them all the way to the door of a brightly light establishment with *Drug Store* written over the entrance in neon, furnished behind the floor-to-ceiling windows in studiously retro Fifties chic, with a high bar with tall red stools lined up in front of it, a series of booths upholstered in glittering PVC and a menu full of long words and decimal places.

Soon Will was settled into a booth seat with a sticky Danish pastry in front of him, and Hannibal had a fork poised carefully over a slice of apple pie. Will had let Hannibal order up drinks for the both of them, which had produced two cups of the blend of coffee apparently the most superior on the menu. Will had sipped his and been unable to stop from making a moan of delight, which had put a slight, pleased smile on Hannibal’s face.

It was strange, sitting across from Hannibal again after all that had gone before.

Was it because of how unsettling the memories were that Will felt like everything was happening in bad 3D? Like he was seeing a picture with several different outlines overlaid, and didn't have the right glasses for them to come together and make sense?

Will shifted in his seat, feeling the weight of his phone in his pocket. Nowhere on that phone, after the day of the opera, was a single enquiry after Will's wellbeing from Hannibal, despite all those days beforehand when he'd checked in so regularly that it began to feel like Will actually mattered to him, like they weren't just filling in a form together, like Will wasn't just a problem to solve.

Not that Hannibal had tried to 'solve' – to change him - exactly, not like most Doms would have done.

Up until it had all gone so very terribly wrong, of all the entities in Will's life, the one demanding least of him, really, had been Hannibal.

"Is that pastry satisfactory?" he heard Hannibal asking him now, with a frown.

"Oh yes, fine, thank you." Will smiled. "Very tasty. A good recommendation, this place."

Hannibal seemed to relax a little then, and asked politely about Will's work.

Will elided, explaining a bit about his current classes, claiming Jack was pleased with him. He didn't mention the health assessment or the promotion, and Hannibal either didn't want to bring it up or had more likely forgotten that it was happening altogether.

"You have been well, then?" Hannibal said, like he was actually asking, like he could imagine and believe in a scenario for Will where that might be true.

Will was too dumbfounded by the sheer barefacedness of it to get a lie out, he just shrugged and stirred his coffee and hoped it could be read as an attack of shyness.

More and more, though, he forgot he was acting the endearing Sub, and found himself just talking like he would with anyone – except that he didn't talk like this with anyone, never felt comfortable standing by his opinions and theories when argument would probably follow.

Now, however, with intensity and conflict and yet without real discomfort, he and Hannibal were talking politics, local and global, and of the philosophies of economics and the financial rationale for public holidays.

Their interactions previously had been so hidebound – keeping real life out of their sessions as thought that might prevent their sessions from quite being real.

Will would have been uneasy disagreeing with a session Dom directly about anything. But he refuted Hannibal's opinions on the Affordable Care Act so violently that he made the cups rattle in their saucers when he thumped the table, the very opposite of missivine, and Hannibal only laughed and agreed to concede on some points.

Eventually a waiter came to clear the empty plates from their table, and the spell was broken, Will drawing back half shocked by what he knew he'd just been saying, how he'd been behaving.

Hannibal, though, seemed far from outraged. He sat back a little himself, and pushed up the sleeve of his jacket to look at his watch.

"We both have a long way to travel tonight," Hannibal said.

It didn't sound much like a question, but Will knew what he was being asked.

"Yeah," Will ran a hand through his hair, dislodged in all his frenzy of opinion. "Coming here to DC was a very last minute plan and not really my idea. Work thing, you know? Hard to say

no to. I'd planned to spend my evening finishing up a lecture for my class tomorrow, but it looks like they're getting a quiz now. Still," he drew in a deep breath, "this was nice."

Hannibal inclined his head, and his own smile was more of an answer than what he said.

"Your pets will be pleased to see you home."

"Yeah, I dare say." Will looked out of the store's windows and frowned at the sight of light snow falling. "Speaking of which, we had better get going before the roads get too bad."

But he knew he might already be more than a little lost.

- - -

The next day was Friday, and in the last teaching slot of the day, having handed out papers for the quiz (which had been his plan for the hour all along), Will sat at the front of the lecture theatre to supervise and watched his phone.

He hadn't heard from Bretton, in official or unofficial capacity, and he hadn't yet heard from Hannibal. The health assessment results weren't expected for five working days after the date of the board, in any case.

If he knew he'd passed the assessment, he could stop worrying about hearing back from Hannibal. But if, prior to filing his judgment, Bretton was to contact Will again or follow up on the night's events in any way, Will wanted the insurance of being able to say truthfully that he and Hannibal were in contact. That, and that alone, was all he was interested in Hannibal for.

It was all so beautifully simple when you laid it out like that, as he'd managed to do, distractedly, whilst eating breakfast that morning, informing his dogs out loud that he knew exactly what he was doing with all this and he had a plan, and it was all going to be fine and very simple, and to stop looking so doubtfully at him.

The night before, having got home, he'd taken a long shower, getting the parlor's treatments off his skin and hair, and he'd been surprised to find himself tingling, his skin heated, his blood rising. He'd gone with it; leant his arm forward against the tile, rested his forehead against his arm and reached down with his other hand to stroke himself, surprised again at the intensity of the feeling, the way the touch ran through him instantly, making him hiss and go up on the balls of his feet, sensation too good, his hand against the tile clawing, scraping nails over the smooth ceramic.

It had been quite a while since he'd done this – since before the opera, certainly – and as always he'd struggled to keep his concentration, his brain a mess of images, a patchwork of impressions of what was turning over in his mind – snow falling under a streetlight, the endless road rolling on between DC and Wolf Trap, the reflected glow of light on the red upholstery of the *Drug Store* diner, Hannibal Lecter's muscular, wiry hands…

Will had left himself panting, and with a spattered shower wall to wipe down, suddenly aware of the sharp smell of himself, and of his blood still pounding over every inch of his skin and how it made the fading marks on his neck ache again.

Even thinking of it now he felt himself stir a little in his trousers. He bit his cheek and shuffled in his seat, looking up around the room blindly, checking the wall clock, and then finding his eyes down on his phone again, watching the streaming stars of his screensaver.

With five minutes of the hour left, and most of the students having handed in their papers and disappeared, Will felt his phone vibrating in his palm and focused down on it once more.

A new text message. From Hannibal:

>I have been informed of an exhibition of new work at the Essel Gallery in Baltimore, and I believe it might be of interest to you. If you would wish to go, I would be able to obtain a complimentary ticket on your behalf.

Will blinked at the words, re-read them, and frowned.

He had been imagining a summons to the apartment over the office on Hulton Street, mention of dinner perhaps, or some reference to resuming the sessions – to their mutual need for the paperwork to be completed. A brisk order he would have understood also; he'd offered some pretty intense obeisance to Hannibal when they were at the gala, and he would have thought most Doms would feel confident to ask for more of the same after that.

So what if they'd interacted a little differently at the diner? He'd just about convinced himself none of that had been noticeably odd, merely friendly and relaxed, if admittedly more relaxed than he'd ever been with a Dom before in his life.

This message, though, if not detached, not exactly cold, was certainly distanced. There was not even – when he read the text through again – an explicit suggestion that they attend the exhibit together.

Will turned his phone over in his hands and watched as the last few students came up to his desk to give their papers in. He put these in a pile, stacked and restacked them, getting the edges aligned neatly.

He tried to imagine how he would answer such an invitation if someone else – Jack, perhaps, or Beverley – had sent it.

But then that answer would honestly be telling them he'd never been much into viewing art and crying off with polite thanks.

He could say that to Hannibal, of course. He could draw a line under what had happened in DC and discourage anything more.

He didn't have to put himself through seeing Hannibal again, or any of the feelings it provoked.

He didn't have to run the risk of Hannibal figuring out that – whatever the hell was still between them - primarily Will was just there for his own benefit, to use Hannibal as a means to his own ends.

Picking up his phone, Will closed his eyes for a moment before starting to write. He composed several polite refusals; one with jokes, which he quickly deleted, another very formal one that might have suited but he felt weirdly bad even thinking about sending.

The text he ending up actually sending, he'd written very quickly:

>Sounds interesting – what sort of art? If it's modern I may need an interpreter.

The response pinged back in seconds.

>I am attending the opening party this coming Sunday night, 7.30pm. If you would like to attend then also, I believe those behind the exhibit will be there to explain themselves

Well that cleared nothing up in regard to whether this was some sort of session, or a date, or an awkward attempt at casual sociability with an unavoidable acquaintance.

>Sure! Sounds good.

>Excellent. I will email you the address of the gallery momentarily.

In the empty lecture theatre, Will slumped his head forward onto his desk and groaned.

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The Essel Gallery was exactly the kind of stripped-brick post-industrial space that Will had been imagining. The art, however, rather than the conceptual, impenetrable installation pieces he'd pictured, was actually an exhibit of photographs of service animals taken by their owners, being exhibited to raise money for 'Paws with a Cause'.

“You thought I’d like to see the pictures of the nice doggies, didn’t you?” Will couldn’t resist saying, deadpan, when he’d spotted Hannibal across the room after entering and made his way over to him. “Well, I will admit you’re not wrong.”

Hannibal almost beamed, at least by Hannibal standards of facial expression, to the extent that Will couldn’t help smiling back despite the adrenaline shaking under his skin and all the mess of feelings the sight of Hannibal still provoked.

Hannibal was holding a flute of champagne with two fingers delicately balanced under the bowl of the glass, and he was debonair as always in yet another immaculately tailored suit. Will – his suit of the previous week dispatched back to the parlor in DC in a none-too-carefully-wrapped package – had opted tonight for a sweater over a shirt, and his good jeans, the very ones he’d been wearing when he and Hannibal first met. He might have retreated from the symbolism of that, if he’d owned any other jeans he could be seen in.

He wasn’t dressed as Hannibal might have told him to be. But then Hannibal had been so clear that he didn’t socialize with his Subs, so this very public meeting place might be intended as a sign that they were never going to relate to each other in that way again.

Between Friday and now, Sunday, Will had spent a lot of time thinking about that question.

Here with Hannibal, the definitions didn’t seem quite as important as they should.

“I find most interesting the pictures taken of their dogs by the blind,” Hannibal was saying, and he lead the way to some of the nearby images where they hung, neatly framed, on the wall. “These people cannot compose and frame a picture as sighted camera users can, of course, and yet their animals are caught so well.”

Will took a glass of orange juice from a nearby cluster and nodded, sipping and looking more closely at the pictures Hannibal pointed out. “Yes. I suppose it’s the connection between them. It might be even stronger, in some ways, when you share a sense between you.”

“You have something of that connection with your animals?” Hannibal sounded genuinely interested, like he wouldn’t necessarily assume it to be the case.

“I don’t know. I suppose every dog owner is different.”

“I never asked you how you came to own your dogs.”

“Well, I got Buster first.” Will smiled. “He was injured at the side of the road and I drove him to the vet, and they said it would be tricky to fix him up, so I said I’d pay – that was some years ago, I didn’t have the money, but I went and…” he trailed off, laughing. “I donated various bodily fluids for cash, if you must know and then once he was fixed up I took him home. Winston wasn’t injured, just loose, abandoned I guess, and I took him home too. And then I was visiting the shelter one day just… well, just because it was a horrible day and I kind of ended up there? And I met Malteaser – not my name, I might add – and I just knew he was coming back with me as well.”

“I see. You wished to look after them? It sounds like a pleasingly simple impulse.”

“You’ve never had a pet animal?”

“Not of my own. My parents had a guard dog and he was not there to be petted, though he loved my sister and after…” Hannibal stopped, clearing his throat, eyes darting away for a second. “After that,” he then continued briskly, “I never felt such an urge… or I suppose if I did I thought first of my furniture.”

“Yes, but furniture can’t love you back,” Will said. He’d meant it as a joke, a quick repartee to break the tension that had gathered, but it seemed to fall awfully heavily between them.

He took a sip of his juice, and Hannibal of his champagne, and when Will raised his eyes he saw Hannibal looking at him over the rim of his glass.

Will felt himself blushing.

He'd trusted Hannibal before, and that had led him nowhere good. If Beverley, for example, knew where he was now, and with whom, she'd be in a car and breaking the speed rules on every inch of highway to drag him back. She'd say he was crazy just to be here, never mind what leverage he needed with Bretton and the health board.

But it was so hard, when next to Hannibal – when getting, perhaps, a sliver of view into what might make a man cry at a lullaby for a scared girl - to remember why he should step away from him.

And Hannibal had demanded nothing, as yet, and why was that, anyway?

Will shook himself, and tried to focus on the art in front of him.

They wandered round the gallery. Will started out trying to be restrained and objective, or in other words not making any non-verbal noises at any of the pictures, but a corgi twisting round to look at a little Santa hat that had been placed on its butt broke him, and he realized that with each new picture Hannibal was watching him carefully, waiting for the reaction and then grinning when he got it.

They were here for Will's benefit, no doubt. But why? How did that make sense when Hannibal wasn't apparently trying to be Dominant at all with him any more?

When they'd seen all the photographs, and Hannibal had chatted to a few people he knew – "this is Will Graham, he is an Assistant Professor at the University of Langley," was the proffered and unrevealing introduction – Will began to wonder whether he should make noises about leaving. Even if he could have figured out what effect he was trying to achieve, he wasn't sure he'd know how to start going about it any more.

"If you do not mind being detained in Baltimore a little longer," Hannibal was saying, and Will's head shot up, "there is another restaurant I should like to show you."

Hannibal's voice was oddly hesitant. He didn't sound as comfortable or assured as usual. Did he find Will's company unpleasant, but want to atone for the past somehow with – with what? Pastries and dog photos? Or was this what he thought friends did, some new role he was trying on?

Hannibal must have picked up on his indecision, because he looked away, shoulders held very firmly up. "You of course must be tired and need to get home, you will have classes tomorrow. I did not think."

This ceding of ground was more compelling than any attempt at persuasion might have been.

And Will was almost sure Hannibal didn't actually know that.

"No, it's just…" Will shrugged. "I'm mean, I'm not dressed for anything fancy."

Hannibal turned back, eyes lighting up. "Do not concern yourself. As my guest you would be accepted in any case, but you look quite adequate."

Will gave a short laugh. "Thank you, I'm sure!"

Hannibal bristled owlishly. "What I meant to convey was…"

"I understand. Thank you." Will smiled, not thinking about the etiquette of baring his teeth or holding a Dom's gaze or how he shouldn't give Hannibal a gentle punch on the arm – at least, not until after he'd done all that and Hannibal was still smiling at him.

He still didn't know what the hell was going on. And he still didn't care half as much as he probably should.

- - -

The short walk to the restaurant, side by side, looking at the Baltimore skyline in the dark, was suffused for Will with a dreamy quality, the sensation again of playing a role in the movie of somebody else's life.

Meeting with Hannibal in their scheduled sessions before had had a curious instant intimacy to it – a shared space and a shared duty to interact that he could imagine might be how it felt to be long married. They had eaten together, moved around each other in a careful domestic dance in which sex had seemed technically possible but entirely unlikely. There had been choices made in a sort of weary groove, even though they barely knew each other – so many levels of expectation clouding independent thought.

Now even the air seemed charged, different, as they made their way down narrow stairs to a discreet basement eatery where soft talk and light live jazz absorbed into the swags of dark velvet material hanging on the walls, where couples of all types, Will saw with a jolt – even Doms with Doms, Subs with Subs, the sort of thing that could still get you a psychiatric diagnosis in about ten states – murmured indistinguishably to each other.

Will forgot to see if Hannibal would pull out a chair for him, forgot to smile, forgot to do anything but stare - at the lines of Hannibal's face, his mouth, his bright eyes - and wonder when a point of reference would arrive and what he ought to do when he found one.

And Hannibal was making no apparent effort to be master of the situation himself. Although he took over ordering the wine and then the food as soon as Will suggested it – Will wasn't about to add alcohol etiquette and figuring out what an 'endive' was to the list of things he had to think about just now – Hannibal didn't speak or sit with the casual command that Will would have thought a Dom would show, doing so.

But then Hannibal wasn't being the Dom here. Or at least he hadn't been exactly told that he could be. And if Hannibal was waiting for Will's permission, then Will had misunderstood something along the way, and he couldn't unpick it now, didn't want to, because if on one level this was terribly confusing, on another he felt so stupidly pleased just to sit here in Hannibal's company, in the line of sight, all his focus once more.

It wasn't how he wanted to feel. But he didn't seem to have any choice about that.

“You know this place well?” Will asked, eventually, because just staring at each other wasn’t going to get them far, except perhaps in making his skin heat further and itch under his sweater, blood too close to the surface, a damp awareness of a chain of thought travelling in entirely the wrong direction.

Hannibal nodded. “They have an excellent menu, as I trust you will soon agree. It is the only place I have ever found that can attempt *Suquet de peix*. When I first came to Baltimore I visited often – and that, I might add, was many years ago now.” He sighed, looking around the room for a moment. “But as you see, this is a favored spot for… intimate meetings. Romantic dalliances.” He paused, licking his lips quickly. “And eventually I found that when I came here I left with a full belly, but also a sensation of aloneness by which otherwise I was untroubled.”

His voice was so low, smooth and soft and when the hesitations cut through his speech it did more and worse things to Will’s skin.

Will spoke carefully. “But tonight you thought you would bring me here?”

“Tonight I asked you.” Hannibal looked away yet again, and sucked in his lip, biting at it, and Will had his hand across the table, clasping over Hannibal’s, before he could stop to think twice, and of course then he froze, entirely self-conscious paralysis, with the hand still there, at the worst moment.

But Hannibal didn’t flinch or leer or correct him. Slowly, he turned his hand over – one of them was shaking, bringing unsteadiness to both – and allowed the contact to linger before speaking again.

“Yes,” Hannibal said. His eyes meet Will’s, the depths shining. He was nodding, slightly. “Yes. This is what must be discussed.”

Will didn’t know what he would have said then, or worse still what he might have done, there, in public, because the wine waiter arrived at his shoulder, closely followed by their appetizers, and the moment had broken.

He could leave, he thought, as he investigated a strange twirl of rocket leaf and parmesan shavings on a plate dotted with three spots of oil and vinegar and called a salad. He could walk away from all this, probably should. Anything that could feel like such a weight in his chest, such a part of his breathing spoke danger of every kind.

"We forgot to ask the curator of the photographs about her rationale," Hannibal was saying, his own fork raised, his manner genial, easy, and almost convincing. "How remiss of me. That is after all why you came tonight."

"That isn't why I came tonight," Will corrected him, quite firmly.

He saw Hannibal's breath catch.

"Eat up before it gets cold," Will suggested, his mouth ahead of his mind. "What on Earth is that, anyway?"

"*Arros negre*." Hannibal met his gaze again for a breathless moment, searching, and then nodded slightly and continued. "A Spanish rice dish, similar to paella, flavored and colored with squid ink."

Will inclined his head slightly, and wondered if Hannibal would oblige with more.

"More specifically," Hannibal added, obediently – and Will felt a drop-kick of serotonin like a flood - "it is Valencian – Valencia being the area of Spain which invented paella. There is a strong Arabic heritage in Valencian cuisine dating back to the time of the Moorish occupation, and reflected in many dishes."

Will speared another leaf of his salad and leant in, again waiting for more.

Hannibal actually relaxed a little, took a bite of his own dish, smiling in appreciation, and then continued, outlining a history of food and settlement, of war and religious strife

counterpointed with the daily need to eat and the unbound universality of flavor, of an interchange of nourishment alongside that of violence.

Will allowed the words to wash over him. It had irritated him once, Hannibal's voice, in its steady calm, but he could see now that under that serene surface many things swirled and seethed, and that Hannibal knew he knew, and didn't mind it. In fact Will rather thought Hannibal was presenting this composure to him, for Will to enjoy, both at the surface and on the levels of understanding beneath.

Quite quietly, they kept eating. With each new dish from the tasting menu, Will asked his questions about the food – and he certainly had questions, because he'd never heard of *liebre a la cazadora* before, or seen anyone eat hare ever - and let Hannibal weave the stories for him, and then they would lapse in silence, allowing the music and the murmur of the other diners to fill the air. They were not going to speak of anything really private here – Will felt that had been understood between them – and yet it was not because it would feel unsafe.

The question of where they might go and when they might talk, Hannibal was the first to approach, towards the end of meal, whilst stirring another of his connoisseur's coffee blends.

"If I were to ask you to accompany me back to my house now, Will," he said, "would you understand what I meant - and did not mean – by that?"

A single square of dark chocolate had come at the side of each of the coffee cups, and Will let the moment hang between them as he unwrapped his and snapped it in half with a satisfying hollow sound.

"I'm not sure, actually," he said, and put one piece of the chocolate in his mouth, the sudden burst of richness reminding him of the first time Hannibal had touched him, how he'd thought, then, of the way chocolate hits the tongue and melts, instantly transformed by the very act of being tasted. "I wouldn't like to make any claim to understand you, Hannibal Lecter. But why don't you ask and see?"

Hannibal frowned. He didn't quite like that, Will thought, and felt another dark, rich ripple through him that had nothing to do with what he was eating. He might have been drunk, but he'd had one glass of wine with the meal and otherwise stuck to water. Nonetheless

something was giving him the warmth that usually came from alcohol, like having a core of fire powering out through to his fingertips.

"Will," Hannibal said, tightly. "Would you accompany me back to my house?"

Will licked his lips, took another sip of coffee. Too many stimulants, blood rushing, and it felt like he was thinking with tremendous clarity, and the last time he'd had that everything had fallen apart under his hands.

"Certainly," he said.

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Will drove after Hannibal's car in the darkness, back to the townhouse which tonight looked even more like something fortified, like the moat and portcullis and boiling oil would all be there if you looked hard enough.

But Hannibal opened the locks and they were through the door, Will first, walking into the wide, cold hallway as Hannibal closed up behind, and stopping, having braced for the impact of the memories, letting each sight sink in and spark its association, until soon he could turn around and look back at Hannibal and pretend to be impassive.

Hannibal had hurt him, here. And at the thought Will wanted to fly at him, to wrestle him down, and just…

"Yes?" Hannibal said, all innocence, and Will strode towards him, herding him back against the door without yet touching him, aware of the heat between their bodies in contrast to the chill of the house, the noise and mess of them in this controlled space.

"Tell me, have I misunderstood why I'm here?" Will asked, with a hiss. He pulled off his gloves, dropping them deliberately to the floor, then stripped off his coat, chucking it at a chair, which it hit and then slipped off.

Hannibal watched him, and smiled slightly, nodding. “I do not think so. I did not bring you here specifically seeking a physical encounter, but you feel it, do you not?”

“Feel what?” Will wanted to grab him, shake him, wanted to bite… That voice, that *voice* that had always got under his skin even as it soothed, those sharp cheekbones, prominent and breakable, that hair just long enough to grab, just as it had been in the photograph on the Chamber Music Society webpage all those weeks ago, when Will had surveyed him and thought *I suppose this will do.*

“Feel what it is that you really want,” Hannibal said, like he’d heard every one of Will’s thoughts, and Will, blinking, remembered himself for a moment and pulled back.

“I don’t… I – I didn’t…” Will swallowed and hugged his arms around himself. He looked away, at the pattern of stone on the floor, at the velvet stripes on the wallpaper. It might be too late to backtrack, to go back to their original script, but he’d try. “I don’t know why I’m…”

“You know very well.” Hannibal took a step towards him, then another. Will had his mouth open just trying to get air in, and the ache that began in his chest ran down the center of him and he was hard, erect and straining in his trousers and Hannibal would see that, Hannibal saw it all.

Closer Hannibal came, and then passed him, and walked further into the house, pausing to look over his shoulder, waiting and watching but saying nothing, until finally Will managed to get himself moving again, bewildered, and follow.

Round the bend in the hall passage there was a wide, wooden flight of stairs, heavily carpeted. Doors nearby lead to a gleaming fitted kitchen and another room perhaps for dining, but it was up the stairs that Hannibal was going, casting glances over his shoulder every few steps.

It was hard to read Hannibal’s expression in the dim surroundings of few lamps and dark wallpaper – the house was like a museum, Will thought, and moving through it like being in

one of those preserved interiors excised from their original setting and set up to be seen, except that light would damage them and so not to be seen too well or too much.

There was nothing dirty, though, in the murk, with every object he could see spotless and in perfect alignment with gravity and its neighbors.

Hannibal's spirit level – metaphorical or otherwise – was to be understood to be functioning perfectly, that was the message of this house to its visitors.

Having reached the second floor, Hannibal opened a door off the landing and they went into a room where – as Hannibal flicked a switch by the entrance – Will was momentarily blinded with the brightness of the light, which came strong and in every direction. This, by contrast, could have been a room in a museum archive – it was not unlike the journals store at his university – full of rows of ugly metal shelving, each shelf packed with books and boxes, files and folders.

"And all this is?" Will asked, turning to look back at Hannibal, who still stood in the doorway, his hand on the switch. At Will's words he straightened up and frowned, as if with an effort.

"You should know that I have had nightmares," Hannibal said, "of someone other than myself finding this room. Of coming here to find that someone else had gone through it, and seen what is here."

"Why? Your whole house is obviously full of precious things. What's here specifically?"

"Largely, things very mundane. Some valuable but not secret. Records of birth, certificates of academic achievement, bank statements, tax returns."

"And?" Will took a step towards him. He'd let his voice go low, coaxing. He could see the tension in Hannibal's mouth; whatever was here mattered - he wasn't exaggerating, this wasn't hyperbole at all.

Hannibal looked away. Swallowed.

"Tell me," Will urged, and the heat was coming up through him like the steadily increasing flow to a gas burner, and there was roaring in his ears. "You want to tell me, you brought me here to tell me. So tell me."

"It is not…" Hannibal raised his arm, then ran a hand over his face. "I had not imagined how it might actually feel to…"

Will went to his side, and carefully, purposefully, reached out, and encircled Hannibal's wrist very gently with his fingers.

His own hand was ice cold and sweat-slick with fear, and Hannibal's pulse bounded in the dip between his wrist bones, and when their eyes met Will felt seen in a nakedness such as he'd never felt in his life, and he began to understand why Hannibal was so afraid.

Hannibal was pulling away from him, tugging down, and Will caught him, pushed him back against the wall and braced him up with his own body.

"No," Will said, soft. "You have to tell me."

Hannibal's smile could almost have been called proud.

"You are telling yourself at this moment," Hannibal said. "You know it to be true. What you are."

Will shook his head, panting, something almost like a sob coming out, because no, this was not allowed, this was not spoken, this was not possible.

"I didn't test out Dominant," he protested, voice cracking. "I'm a 0.7 aligned…"

Hannibal rolled his body weight, reminding Will of all the ways Will held him down, and Will tried to leap back like a scalded cat but Hannibal's arms were up too, now, and round him, holding on, keeping him close, one cupping the back of his neck.

"You can't define a human being with a number, Will."

"But you're… If I'm… You're letting me…" Will stopped, took a long deep breath. Somehow, during it, his head tipped forward to rest against Hannibal's shoulder, and nothing made sense and every which way was up or down or backwards.

It was the scent of Hannibal's body, the near-taste of him, thick and heavy near his armpit, that chased through Will's senses and ignited, and let him barrel back and break Hannibal's grip, until he was standing a few paces back, teeth bared, and shouting, tears rising in his eyes:

"But you dropped me!" Will protested. "You fucking dropped me!"

- - -

Six

When Will had spoken – had shouted, boiling over with his own pain – Hannibal had flinched.

And now, as Will stared at him, Hannibal looked, above all things, to be hurting.

So much so as to cut through the thick fog of Will's anger, and make him want, when he spoke again, to be just a little softer.

"I have never dropped before in my life," Will continued, breathing hard, struggling to control his voice. "I'd never, ever found this 'subspace' people kept telling me about, that I saw in movies or read about in books. And OK, maybe then – *maybe* – I might have had doubts about my alignment, but now? That night you fucking ignored me and abandoned me at the opera house? You. Dropped. Me."

Hannibal took a sharp breath in, and then stood up straight, shoulders back. "That is my pride and my shame, then."

Will broke into bewildered laughter.

"It is not…" Hannibal's hands wrung over each other for a moment, and then he brought them back to his sides, still. "I was not sure, at the time, on that evening, that that was the situation which you had…"

"Well clearly!" Will spat out, interrupting. "Or you wouldn't have shoved me out of your house to wander the streets for a fucking cab when I was hitting bottom and vomiting my guts out, and left me shivering for all those fucking days without a single text message to ask if I even got home OK!"

Will was shaking again, and Hannibal held out hand towards him and Will hated how much he wanted to be under it.

“My recollection of those events is not entirely clear,” Hannibal was saying, voice tight. “I was not without… sequelae, myself.” He chewed his lip for a moment, his eyes wide and dark when his gaze darted up, and Will had to fight an urge to reach out in return.

“At the time my over-riding thought,” Hannibal continued, “was that I had been intimate with you in a way you wished to avoid and that my… limitations, as a Dominant partner had become obvious to you. I was conscious that you were not happy, but I… and I will admit no little panic on my own behalf.”

“You…” Will staggered back a few more paces, winded. He bent forward, bracing his hands on his knees, then stood straight again, breathing.

“What ‘limitations’? Are you… are you passing as a Dom? You’re not… If you’re queer, if you like other Doms you can say, I mean,” he gave a short, bitter laugh. “How much weirder can this get?”

“I do not know what I am – what they would call me, with their measurements - nor do I particularly care, other than that I am myself.”

And Hannibal moved across the room, passing Will without coming any closer than he had to as he made his way to one of the rows of shelves. “Let me show you what I brought you here to show you.”

Hannibal removed a storage box from a stack roughly in the middle of one row. He brought it to a small table by the heavily shuttered window and took off the lid, then searched through some layers of papers before pulling out a slim plastic wallet, which he passed over.

Will opened the fastening and started to examine the contents. The first sheet was an old, rather grainy photocopy of an application form for an EB-2 US entry visa, filled out in Hannibal’s name in 1998. Behind it there was a standard-form alignment test results card, not unlike the one Will had got in High School, also dated 1998. It scored Hannibal as a - 0.8 intensity Dominant.

“I don’t understand what I’m supposed to be seeing here,” Will looked up, frowning, rather startled by the score. He had been physically holding down someone with that degree of alignment?

But then, how good were those tests? The very question was unthinkable, he’d always known that much. You got your alignment intensity and you lived it. The only time you heard of switches it was someone ranting about the decline of morals on the TV, or another switch-bashing making the evening news.

What Hannibal was saying was dangerous, and Will was certainly afraid.

But he barely even thought of walking away.

“Keep looking,” Hannibal prompted.

Behind the visa papers, there was an old passport – Lithuanian, issued 1994, with Hannibal’s name and a small photograph of a younger man with the same piercing eyes.

Then there was a folded sheet, rather dog-eared, which Will opened with care.

This too was an official form, in a language he couldn’t read, but imagined to be Lithuanian also. Lines had been printed to be filled in under headings that he could work out must be ‘name’ and ‘date of birth’, and another probably for birthplace and name of father.

The only entry for a number that wasn’t obviously a date or a height was next to the word *keliaklupsčiavimas*. But that number was zero.

“You’re not null aligned!” Will looked up in amazement, then frowned. “But this wouldn’t be the US system anyway.”

“Actually, it is the same test – the Kinsey-Modified Wechsler Alignment Attribution Metric.”

Will laughed. “They called it KWAM, at school: *‘Next week it’s your KWAM-tests, kids, remember to sleep right the night before so you’re fresh, don’t listen to older kids winding you up telling you what happens if you say this or that, just tell the truth.*’”

“This test, in 1994, was my first. There was no regulated testing of alignment under the USSR, it was not regarded as in line with Socialist ideals.” Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “Of course, alignment was still perceived and labeled, as it had always been historically, in the home and the family via more straightforward rubrics. With the return of independence in 1993 and the subsequent application to join NATO, to adopt some cultural practices of Western Europe and North America was seen as prudent, and so testing arrived. They use the European Union standardized metric now, I believe.”

“So… But if this was the same test as the one at US Immigration, why is there such a difference in your scores?”

“Because that was what I wished there to be.” Hannibal smirked. “At the time I wished to come to America it was harder to get an exit-visa from Lithuania – at the time they still existed – if you were Dominant and in a valued profession such as surgery. Conversely, in order to get the visa to enter the USA in a preference category for employment and permanent residence, it was most helpful to be an advanced degree holder of specialist ability and, though it was not explicitly stated, a Dominant. I achieved the test sores to suit my purpose in both cases.”

“But how?” Will thought back to what he could recall of his own test. The multiple choice ‘most right answer’ options, the non-verbal reasoning, the strange ‘pick the shape which appeals most to you’ and ‘choose one of these words’ instructions. All to time, and all prefaced with a strict injunction to be ‘instinctive’ and yet also ‘think carefully’.

“I was twenty-nine when I took my test, you were sixteen. You had been told to comply with it, that it would help you. I knew it must be made to help me. You had people who knew you, who might question an answer they did not expect. I…” Hannibal cleared his throat. “I bought old papers and answer keys on the black market, which remained thriving for some time even after the end of Soviet shortages. I got a psychiatry professor drunk on cheap vodka, and learnt more of the ridiculous theory that underpins the scoring system and subsequent categorization. I could not, of course, anticipate exactly the paper I would get, but I could make a safe prediction for each question offered and answer accordingly.”

Will bit his lip, considering. “So what were you assigned with your at home, before that? With your family? By the ‘straightforward rubrics’?”

There was a pause. Hannibal drew in a deep breath. “In my family,” he said slowly, “all first born sons were Dominants.”

“Is that even possible?”

“It should not be, at least not by the psychiatric standard in vogue currently.”

“But were you?”

Hannibal stared back at him.

“What do you think you are?” Will asked, more softly now.

“I think I never cared about any of this,” Hannibal waved his hand between them, in the region of their necks, “until I met you.” He let out a short, bitter laugh. “I fulfilled all manner of criteria in many situations, but I was never intimate, never connected, never seen. And you may believe that this – you, in my life, looking at me how you do - has been somewhat of a terrifying experience, and like a coward I ran from it, and from you.”

Will breathed for a moment. “But you want me to be a Dom for you now?”

“I want you. You, yourself. And whatever that is…”

“You’ll be you in relation to that?”

Hannibal shook his head, smiling again. “I know who I am,” he said, firmly. “And I know I want what you are, who you are, fully expressed.”

Will swallowed. “So if I asked you to kneel?”

“I believe that Dominants do not ask.”

“This one does.”

“Ask me then.”

Will stepped forward, hands going out, and pushed lightly down on Hannibal’s shoulders, putting the question in his eyes, allowing Hannibal every opportunity to push back.

His hands were shaking. He probably couldn’t have forced Hannibal down even if he’d wanted to.

Down Hannibal went, though, until he was on his knees before Will, looking up with glowing affection in his gaze, and Will had to close his eyes for a moment and tighten his grip on Hannibal’s shoulders because his knees had gone weak.

It did feel the same - the same sweet slide he remembered from when they’d closed with each other after the opera, when he’d been playing a different role and yet… and yet, when he let himself see it, the struggling, the fighting that had been in him then, the way he’d pushed Hannibal into doing what he wanted…

“Was I so oblivious?” Will asked, voice unsteady. “Or is it all bullshit? Do you know what they said about people who might Switch, when I was growing up? Do you know what they did to them?”

And he clutched hold of Hannibal, leaning over him, feeling Hannibal's breath hot against his thighs as Hannibal laughed gently at him and against him.

Sweet, and then again sweet – not identical, caramel and toffee or candy and peaches, the sweetness of an orange through to the sweetness of chocolate, it could be opposite and the same simultaneously, that was the thing.

"I want you on a bed," Will said, breathless. "Where's a bedroom we could use?"

"You are not going to demand the use of my own bedroom?"

"Fuck it. Fine. Take me to your bedroom. I bet it looks like the inside of a fucking chocolate box, knowing your tastes."

Hannibal was drawing away, enough to get to his feet. "I prefer to think of it as the jewel case, the correct setting for the luster of the gem within. And now I have you."

Will started laughing now, staggering back until he hit the wall to lean on, watching Hannibal carefully dusting off the knees of his trousers.

"God, Hannibal. How can you be how you are?"

"As easily as you can be," Hannibal said, calmly, and made his way out of the room.

Will was going to strip the calm from that voice, the smirk from that face and it was going to happen soon and he felt like the farthest stretch of the elastic before everything leaps forward.

Hannibal's bedroom was entirely like the inside of a posh chocolate box, the light warm and scarce, and the bed itself covered in variously sized throw pillows. There was an honest to goodness fireplace on one wall, with a white rug in front of it.

It was like a film set, a clichéd one, every object with attendant expectations, and Will felt the fear cracking through him again, the self-doubt. How could he hope to capture Hannibal's attention – to capture or to hold anything of him at all?

If Will had still been trying to play the good Sub, the missivine model, he'd have some idea what to do, how to start. He might have hung his head, asked permission to strip, lain himself out over the bed and waited, pliant.

The thought of Hannibal in that position shuddered through his mind, but he couldn't frame it, couldn't see how to ask or to order that.

Hannibal was just standing there, watching him, waiting.

'Take your clothes off," Will said voice cracking a little on the words so he had to clear his throat and swallow. "All of them."

Serenely, Hannibal started to comply, removing his jacket and then pulling his shirt up out of the waist of his trousers, moving to unbutton.

"Turn away from me," Will said, speaking as soon as the impulse hit him.

Hannibal frowned.

"Do I need to repeat myself to you? Turn around, I'm not looking at the smirk on your face any longer."

Not that the smirk was there now. It was with a strange expression that Hannibal turned, moving until he was facing the foot of the bed, his back to Will and to the door.

Will clenched his fists at his sides, rose up on his toes, let his eyes fall shut for a moment and told himself to breathe.

"Clothes off," he repeated, as firmly, coldly as he could.

And then Hannibal was standing naked, still with his back to Will, and Will could see the planes of his muscle under the smooth, pale skin, the spine making an arch and then a groove down, and down, to the cleft of the firm buttocks.

He took a step closer. Easier, being clothed himself, and heady, the imbalance of the situation on the one hand with the reality of it underneath – that Hannibal had every choice to turn around and simply did not – and then beneath that the deeper currents, what they wanted and needed of each other, the ways they clawed, now, into the desperate damaging secrets that could make wielding power too easy, and so much more complicated.

"I've never… I've had a male Dom for a session, once or twice, but never anything…" Will stopped himself, and breathed again. He put out his hands, rested them down on Hannibal's hips, high on his waist, and felt Hannibal flinch at the sudden touch and no doubt the cold of his skin, and let his own body's reaction flow through him in echo.

He could see, peering slightly around Hannibal's body, that Hannibal's cock was flushed, perhaps slightly stiffer than it might be at rest – not that Will had a point of comparison besides himself – but there was some way to go.

"You're making me try so many new things," Will said, low, and slid his palm around and over Hannibal's stomach, feeling the tickle of hairs under his fingertips, the gentle slope of the muscle. Moving again, he cradled the prominence of Hannibal's right hipbone, feeling the thinness of the skin there. "This isn't a person I've let myself be before, and now I'm here, for you, and everything is new and I'm fucking terrified."

Will let Acceptance slip into his voice, which should have been all out of place here, and somehow did not feel that way.

“Language,” Hannibal reprimanded, maybe from automatic habit, even as he shuddered, and Will tightened his grip, pulled Hannibal’s pelvis back against him, the sensitive skin of Hannibal’s ass against the coarse grain of Will’s jeans and the scratch of the still-closed fly, and the mounting heat of Will’s erection where it swelled beneath.

Hannibal’s breath caught and as he lost his balance with the motion his hands flew out for a moment, a moment of total vulnerability.

Will, widening and firming his own stance, plastered himself against Hannibal’s back, and dipped his hands lower, feeling up the insides of Hannibal’s thighs, brushing in the wrong direction over his thick leg hair, stroking tender, hot skin just lightly enough – he hoped – to make Hannibal ache. Then he raked over Hannibal’s chest and found his nipples, smoothing over them with his flattened fingers and then pinching, pulling, exploring exactly as he chose and Hannibal was swaying a bit now, perhaps they both were, breathing gone heavy and almost synchronized.

Will ground his hips forward again and Hannibal’s head tipped back onto Will’s shoulder, accompanied by a moan.

Will made a kind of cry and silenced himself by pressing his mouth into the curve of Hannibal’s neck, smelling and licking the scent as with his left hand he reached up to stroke at Hannibal’s exposed throat, so gently over his Adam’s apple as it bobbed and moved with Hannibal gulps at the air. Hannibal moaned again, tipping his head back yet further as if seeking more, trying to nose at Will’s hair, and that set them nearly overbalancing again, and Will had to stagger back a pace.

“You bit me,” Will whispered now in Hannibal’s ear, and with his right hand went back to playing with Hannibal’s nipples, pinching harder now, pulling them out between finger and thumb as best he could – not as easy as with a woman but liquidly satisfying all the same.

“You bit me, what did that mean? Tell me.”

Hannibal angled his head, an obvious invitation, and Will smacked his palm quickly, cleanly, against Hannibal’s belly, which made him grunt and gasp and try for half a moment to leave Will’s hold, only to sink back again almost at once.

“Tell me, Hannibal.”

“Everything I did was because I wanted you, even though I never thought you might be something I could have.” Hannibal was starting to sweat despite his nakedness and the scent of his body, his hairline, rose more fiercely to Will’s nose. Will licked the side of his neck and then, teeth bared, nibbled so lightly along the tendon that Hannibal could probably barely feel he had done so.

And Hannibal protested, bucking backwards again and searching, and Will laughed and smacked him, his flat, hard chest and his soft stomach and the fronts of his thighs, not hard enough to mark but hopefully enough to sting.

Will was floating up, up, into where it was warm and sure and sunny. He had Hannibal close and ready to hold him up and he never had any idea what he was doing but this was what Hannibal wanted and he could do that, he knew he could do that.

“Do you how many people side-eyed me for those bite-marks?” Will scraped his nails up Hannibal’s chest, rocked his erection against Hannibal’s ass and gave a soft, dark laugh. “You marked me up and you didn’t call me, you didn’t call me once.”

“I am sorry that I…”

“No,” Will moved his hands quickly and pulled back, gaining momentum to shove Hannibal sharply down against the bed, so that he fell forwards, just catching himself with his hands against the covers in time. “We’re not talking now. You’re not talking now. You’re doing what I tell you to do.”

Hannibal made a sound almost like a growl, and pushed up and back, and Will leant down with all his weight to stop him, and though that would not even have begun to be enough if Hannibal had really wanted to move, it seemed to tilt the balance again and Hannibal went down on his elbows, one of his feet still planted on the floor between Will’s legs.

Will curved over, following, and dragged his mouth all down the line of Hannibal's spine, finally kissing, lushly, at the top of his behind. Will was rock hard in his jeans now, aware of the damp press of fabric straining around his cock. With a gasp, he undid his belt buckle and unzipped, letting out a long breath at the relief of space.

A wave of tension passed over Hannibal's body, and Will realized that given his action and their respective positions, Hannibal might be expecting now that he was about to be penetrated without further preparation or consideration.

It was on the tip of Will's tongue to offer an apology, and a garbled one at that, but he caught himself in time, and allowed a small sense of triumph to move through him as he spoke.

"I'm not fucking you like that today. You haven't earned that. Not yet. Get on the bed properly now, elbows and knees, come on."

Hannibal climbed up, going on all fours as instructed, and Will could see quite easily between his legs now, and so see his increasing arousal, his cock hanging heavy and bobbing up against his stomach despite gravity.

Will had a sudden flash of all the things he could do to Hannibal in this position, all the things he might touch him with, the myriad ways and things to press against him, something cold or hot or vibrating, something sharp, something that would mark; another wave of delight, another push higher into the rush of the moment.

It had become far too hot – Will pulled his shirt off and his t-shirt beneath, so that his top half was bare, and he could curl over Hannibal's body again, his chest to Hannibal's back, skin to skin, and give in to the urge to rub up a little against him. That had the effect of immobilizing himself again, full body shudder overwhelming everything else, because the head of his cock was sticking out from his underwear and he'd managed to catch the angle to rub it against Hannibal's cleft, slickly snug.

He groaned, leaning in and mouthing blindly against the base of Hannibal's neck, and got a grunt back in reply, and Hannibal shifting equally blindly back against him.

“You don’t mind how I smell so much any more, I guess?” Will muttered, and only got a moan back; it didn’t matter, the words were nothing to how their bodies were connecting.

If he could only keep that connection this good: steeling himself somewhat, telling himself it couldn’t possibly be that complicated, Will reached around with his right hand to take a grip, tentative and then more firmly, on Hannibal’s cock, and Hannibal bucked again, and there was slickness there, leaking from him, all thanks to what Will was doing, and he knew he must look so ridiculous from a distance but they were up close to each other and nothing else mattered.

He stroked and stroked, trying to get in rhythm with the shifting of Hannibal’s hips, and felt Hannibal adjusting his position, shifting his knees even more widely apart and giving Will space, access, invitation.

And Will understood, now, exactly why Hannibal had needed to bite.

But Will needed something else yet more.

“Turn over,” he urged, voice hoarse. “Turn over, let me see you, I want to see you, I want you to see me do this to you, you made me do this, Hannibal, you made me like this.”

Hannibal groaned like it was the dirtiest script ever concocted for Playdom magazine rather than just more of Will babbling, and wrestled his way over in Will’s now light hold, getting onto his back and looking up – staring, wide eyed, something desperate and disbelieving in his gaze.

“Fuck, Hannibal…” Will had to look away for a moment, then brought his hand back between them, cupping and stroking at Hannibal, his own cock throbbing and ready and trapped in his underwear; he didn’t want it out now, that would be too much, too naked, too naked entirely.

Will curled over again, hiding his face by going in for a kiss, Hannibal’s mouth hot and bitter against his own, the lingering aftertaste of restaurant coffee and hours of anticipation, even

fear – he'd not thought of Hannibal being afraid of taking them here, but perhaps for all his outward calm he had been.

Will moved his hand, learning the feel of Hannibal's cock, the smoothness and strangeness of the foreskin moving, the slickness of the head. He thought he could just sit and stroke in fascination for hours – perhaps one day he could, he might, and see what that would do.

And then Hannibal reached up, suddenly, hands digging into Will's upper arms as Hannibal clung and cried and jackknifed, and was coming between them, hot and violent, and Will felt like the spring of the start of the dive and the splash of glory at the end altogether, trying to draw Hannibal in yet closer, nosing at his chin and cheek and mouth, and feeling every sweet shudder.

Too soon – anything would have been too soon – Hannibal was drawing back, his hands moving purposefully again, pushing at the waist of Will's trousers, trying to get them down.

"You don't have to," Will began.

"I have to," Hannibal snapped back, and you could have believed he was furiously angry. "I have to. Tell me to stop."

"Stop," Will said, and pulled away just enough to push trousers and underwear down himself, feeling his stomach tense and his skin prickle with goosebumps as his cock sprang free and into the cool air.

He was still standing at the foot of the bed, and Hannibal was sitting in front of him now, head raised, hair gone wild though Will didn't remember doing it. Hannibal was beautiful naked, Will saw – somehow the sheer fact of the nakedness, before, had been more than he could process, and the thought of bringing their bodies side by side was enough to make his cock duck and bob again.

Hannibal reached out his hand.

“No,” Will said, and for the heck of it tried to shove in Command to his tone.

He succeeded. He could hear it himself, and feel the instant terror of the forbidden in reflex.

Hannibal titled his head back for a moment, groaning up at the ceiling, eyes closed, and his chest – both their chests – spackled with Hannibal’s fresh come and still Hannibal’s cock twitched again at the sound of Will’s voice.

“Wait,” Will said, the effect lessened by the thickness of phlegm in his throat. He coughed, stepped forward, as close as he could get to Hannibal whilst staying standing on the floor. Hannibal in turn shifted a little, widening his legs until they bracketed Will’s.

“Wait,” Will said again, and let it flow through him another moment, the thrill, the bliss of this, of having Hannibal all coiled and ready before him, and holding back only for his command. He was so aroused he could almost cry, and desperate for touch and he was going to get it, any moment, as soon as he asked, and there couldn’t be a better feeling than that agony in the world.

Clumsy, he reached out and took Hannibal’s hand, and brought it between them and to rest on his cock.

“That,” Will said. “That and your other hand anywhere you like but only your hands, now, just now, that’s enough, that’s all I can cope with.”

Hannibal immediately stuck a finger into his own mouth. It might have looked ridiculous, a middle-aged man in such a pose, but Hannibal was so focused, brisk and sloppy and clearly goal-oriented – the gesture was not about what Will saw.

Then Hannibal was stroking him, just gently enough to make the backs of Will’s knees sweat and his teeth ache, and working that wet finger round behind him, slipping round to Will’s ass and rubbing up against the strip of skin behind his balls and higher, searching.

Will had been opened up before. Melissa had tried plugging him, a couple of times, and he knew that technically he had a prostate that would probably feel good if he bothered with it, but at the time it hadn't done much for him and he'd shrugged and given up.

Now, it was different, but now every part of him that Hannibal touched felt a thousand times more erotically effective than ever at any other time he could remember, so the data wasn't exactly much use.

"So good," Hannibal whispered, as Will tightened back on the tip of his finger and fell forward to lean on Hannibal's shoulders again, hugging his head, and moaned. "So good you are, Will."

Will gasped and put one hand on Hannibal's arm, where Hannibal's hand was moving steadily on Will's cock. He didn't try and change the pace, just felt the movement, felt that he could. He was getting close, and he didn't want this to stop, didn't want to get off the ride and have to stagger away, but hearing that praise was what he needed, what might make it alright.

"Tell me," he said, and it might have been more of a Plea than a Command but apparently that didn't have to matter between them.

"So good, so beautiful, Will," Hannibal was, perforce, talking partly into Will's stomach and the words were visceral, hot breath and vibration against his skin as well as the sound for his forebrain to analyze. "So good, so very good, so wonderful in your understanding, I have never…" he stopped, panting, but kept his hands moving, the stroking and the gentle, gentle thrusting of his finger which was more of a promise than a reward.

A token for the future, Will thought, and hung on yet more tightly.

"Tell me, please," he said, and then, preventing his own gratification. "Do you know how good you are for me? Do you know what you've done to me? Hannibal…"

Hannibal stroked him once, twice, three times more and then looked up, head tilted, throat bare, and smiled a wrecked sort of smile when he met Will's eyes.

“Will,” he said, like he knew what that meant, who Will really was in ways Will didn’t even yet. Like he saw everything, all of it, and it was beautiful to him.

And Will fell down into his arms, coming, shaking, and they were in a filthy mess but Hannibal just drew his arms and legs around Will’s body like he had to hold on not to fall, and yanked a blanket over them both.

- - -

Just before midnight, Will came slowly awake and remembered where he was and what he’d done.

He still had Hannibal’s arms loosely round him. They were lying side by side on the bed, and under the one blanket, which was no longer really enough since their bodies had cooled. The air between them reeked of sex and sweat, and they were sticky with each other in a way just disgusting enough to be erotic.

When Will looked, Hannibal was blinking at him, sleepy and relaxed.

“I need to call my neighbor about my dogs,” Will said, almost in a whisper, as though someone or something else – perhaps his better judgment – was sleeping still.

He rolled off the bed and paced across the carpet, his feet the only part of him covered – they’d never got round to removing his socks – and got his trousers off the floor, fishing in the pockets for his phone. Behind, Hannibal was moving too, getting up and opening another door that turned out to lead to an en-suite. There was the sound of water running.

“Hello, Beverley?” Will sat back on the bed, too self-conscious to stand naked in the middle of the room. “I’m… I got invited to a thing at this gallery and now I’m here overnight, could you check the dogs for me? Sorry it’s so late.”

“Yeah?” Beverley sounded more intrigued than annoyed, at least. “Who was ‘this thing’ and where is ‘here’?”

Will made an equivocating noise. “Not far. In Baltimore. I’ve got the morning free tomorrow so I can make my afternoon schedule OK.”

Beverley laughed. “I didn’t mean to sound like someone’s Mom, I’m just wanting to know you’re alright. And curious too, I guess. Having a good evening?”

Will frowned. “Beverley, would you ask me that question if I was a Dom?”

“Well sure, Will. I care about my friends, I don’t care what… *identity* they have, no one’s come up with one yet that means you’re invulnerable.”

“No, I’m sorry, I just…” Will sighed. “It’s been a slightly weird evening. But good.” He looked across the room at the bathroom door; the shower was running now, and he thought of Hannibal under the spray, naked, and shivered happily. “Definitely good. Just. A lot.”

“Well, listen, don’t worry about the dogs, I will go check them out now, and, OK, if now or any other time you’re wondering whether it’s OK to call me, it always is, alright?”

“Thanks, Beverley. I guess I’d say the same, except, obviously, with you…”

“You think I don’t freak the fuck out sometimes? Or make bad choices?” Beverley laughed a little. “But I’m going to go to your dogs, and you have to get on with your ‘thing’, whoever they are. We’ll talk another time. ‘Night, Will.”

“Goodnight.”

Will put the phone back, then twisted round to look at the bathroom door again for a long moment before getting up and going through it, pacing up to the big shower cubicle and

under the spray, trying to act like he didn't for a moment think he could be rejected.

Hannibal grinned at him, and passed a bar of soap that had mysterious bits of herb embedded in it.

Will started yawning even as the hot water hit him, and the gentle massage of it carried on soothing him down as he cleaned himself.

"I'm too out of it to drive home now," Will announced. "Just so you know."

"I would be insulted if you said you felt capable," Hannibal told him.

"Your fucking *smirk*," Will complained, and pushed in to kiss against it, lazily, until the hot water ran out.

When they'd dried off, Will was ambling sleepily back to the bed when Hannibal, who'd been busy with something at the bedside, caught his arm.

"Would it not be more pleasant on to rest on clean sheets?" Hannibal asked, and drew him out of the room and along the corridor and then up another flight of stairs, the two of them padding along, naked and barefoot together.

On the top landing Hannibal went to one of the closed doors and opened it with a key Will realized he'd been carrying in his hand. Had to have been, since neither of them had put any clothes on, and the view was more than a little distracting.

But when Hannibal opened the door, Will's attention was for a moment completely diverted even from Hannibal's anatomy.

It was a nest. If the chocolate box on the first floor had been the Dom cliché interior, familiar to perusers of whiskey and fine cigar adverts everywhere, then this was the opposite. And yet

it wasn't the stereotypical Sub bedroom either.

The predominant impression was of pastel blue, of something generally quiet. The furniture was of rustic design, the bedstead fashioned of wood with the bark still on, the sheets linen and cotton, covered over in a quilt of intricate embroidered geometric designs picked out in blue and red. The wallpaper had a subtle design of a similar type, and in an alcove near the door shelves bore a few black and white photographs in silver frames.

Will turned to look at Hannibal, his breath catching, trying to think how to express how he felt about what he was being allowed to see.

Hannibal smiled, inclined his head with something that was almost a shrug, a downplaying, embarrassed. "If you would care to?"

Will took a step towards him, frowning. Hannibal, he realized, was actually rather nervous about this.

"It's beautiful," Will murmured, and kissed him, over and over, walking backwards to lead them both to bed.

- - -

The next morning Will awoke to the scent of coffee, and found Hannibal - in a flowing silk robe unfastened and therefore not actually covering anything, just trailing out behind him like he was an unaccountably naked wizard - bringing a tray over to the bedside table on Will's side of the bed.

Will pushed himself up to sit leaning against the headboard, and gratefully took his cup, pausing to breathe in the sharp, wonderful scent before sipping.

Hannibal, sitting on the side of the bed about level with Will's knees, cradled his own cup and kept his eyes on Will's face, the sharp gaze mellowed with a smile.

This could actually be something, Will saw then, with the sudden terrible clarity of early morning thought processes returning to life. *This could be a day I never forget.*

He was hard under the covers, and the coffee and Hannibal's gaze did nothing to ease it, a slumbering soft arousal that was a pleasant background hum with all the other comfortable sensations of a soft mattress and the cool embrace of cotton sheets.

The bed, he'd noticed without much thought already, despite its simple appearance, was typical in having slats along the top of the bedstead that could act as bondage points.

Glancing at them now, Will thought about tying Hannibal down, or letting Hannibal tie him – making him tie Will up and making him do as he was told even though Will was the one technically helpless, riding that trust between them.

He realized he was flushing – the hot drink didn't help – and found Hannibal looking at him again in that way he couldn't cope with, that smirk of amusement and fascination and sheer… warmth, that Will didn't know how to handle.

"I want to tie you up," Will said, to see how it sounded, and Hannibal put his cup down and took away Will's, and crawled up onto on the bed and over him, kissing, running his hands up and down Will's sides until Will was bucking his hips up and trying to shake the covers off and sweating again, no doubt red all over.

"Stop smirking!" he protested, and gave Hannibal a shove so that he fell off him, landing on his back on the bed. Will moved quickly to straddle him, and Hannibal grinned again, more smugly than ever, and leant back quite flat, his hands going to Will's hips.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said, looking at where Will's erection bobbed between them.

Will leant forward, planning to kiss him again to avoid his stare, but Hannibal turned his head away almost at once and pulled Will's hips upwards, along his body.

Confused, Will began to comply, and then a thought occurred and he stopped, panting.

"You can't…"

"I want to," Hannibal said, with devastating firmness. "You can, of course, always order me to stop. However, if you wish to stop looking at my facial expressions, this would seem like a most logical solution."

Groaning, Will reached out to braced himself on the headboard and let his pelvis come forward and forward until his legs were straddled over Hannibal's face, and fuck, the sight in Hannibal's view now couldn't exactly be much and Will was trying to remember exactly how well he'd washed the night before, and wondering if he ought to say something about never having waxed usually and how the parlor had done it and now the regrowth was uncomfortable and he didn't like it either.

Hannibal stuck his tongue up behind Will's balls, and Will forgot how speaking worked.

He gripped onto the headboard for dear life and whined through his teeth.

Hannibal's tongue kept moving. Now soft and lapping, now hard, firm, pushing up. He suckled Will's balls into his mouth, one and then the other, delicate and dangerous, before going back to rubbing at the spot behind them, and then further back, until Will was rocking, moaning, and desperate to get a hand to his unattended cock if only he could remember how to move anything or do anything but hang on.

Hannibal was urging Will over him even more, his fingers digging into Will's buttocks just as desperately, and he was licking and licking at Will's hole, skin gone sensitized and then something worse and then something worse than that, so wonderfully painful or painfully wonderful.

Then Hannibal pushed his tongue right in, and Will let out something like a sob, and coped for maybe a minute grand total and came all over the bed and the wall and himself and

Hannibal's hair, untouched.

He managed, just about, to move enough that when he collapsed he didn't actually smother his bed partner. They still weren't lined up, though, Will cradling Hannibal's head against his chest, Hannibal's hands still stroking around Will's ass, slipping into the cleft now and again and chasing aftershocks of sensation as Will shuddered.

Will tried to shift his body down along Hannibal's, to get to where he could reach for Hannibal's cock.

"Not yet," Hannibal murmured, and Will saw that, though warm and a little stiff, he was not really erect. "Takes a little longer to rejuvenate, at my age."

Will curled in to bite at his ear, gently. "Tell me what to do for you, then," he said, voice coming out half drunk. He didn't have the energy for much, but he wanted to mess Hannibal up, wanted him panting and helpless too – it was like anger, this, so much like anger, like hatred, so fierce and fast it burned.

"Haven't you done enough?" Hannibal said, and he sounded just as bad.

Will got his mouth to the side of Hannibal's neck and sank in his teeth, hard, sucking and sucking till his jaw ached, till he almost believed he could taste the tang of blood, and finally a noise cracked out of Hannibal's throat, and then more, small, half-sobs, and Will kept the bite in place, relentless, soothing his hands over Hannibal's trembling sides all the while.

And then Hannibal let out a cry, sharp and urgent, tensing all over and arching for a moment like he had even found orgasm, before collapsing again beneath Will's body.

Will sat back and saw Hannibal looking up at him, smile quite serene, tears in his eyes, pupils blown completely.

“Yeah,” Will murmured. “That’s what that feels like.” He got some tissues from the box by the bed and wiped them both down a bit, then climbed Hannibal’s body again and wrapped round him, pulling the covers over once more.

He thought for a while he’d be too high, too thrilled to sleep, but the next thing he was truly aware of was his phone alarm going off because it was after midday, and time for him to drive to Virginia for the small matter of his lecture.

- - -

“Hey, Will!”

Will turned around in the corridor he’d been pacing along, on the way from the lecture theatre – he’d just got there in time – back to his office.

“Jack,” he said, and felt abruptly conscious of remembering to behave like a Sub talking to a Sub.

It felt about as awkward as it ever had, if that said anything.

Coming towards him, Jack held up an A4 envelope in his hand. “Results are in, Will.”

“What?” Will felt a sick sensation in his stomach. “The health assessment? I thought that was five days? I wasn’t expecting it yet.”

“Yeah well, clearly they were able to make up their minds without too much trouble.” The grin on Jack’s face certainly showed his confidence in what that decision would be; Will took the envelope and stared at it, a cold lump in his stomach.

Bretton would either have gone through with his threats – and Will had given him pretty good cause to be riled up – or whatever power or investment Bretton perceived Hannibal to have

would have got Will a pass. Will wouldn't have wanted to take a bet on it either way.

It wasn't the greatest thought, either, about how he he'd wanted to use Hannibal for his own ends. If they were together and a side benefit of that was Will getting his tenure, then arguably that was just good all round, but Will didn't want to think back to how he'd left Hannibal just hours ago – sleepy and sated, still a little under, fascinatingly, beautifully so, in a way that made Will want to phone in sick and just spend all day in bed exploring and re-bruising him – and have a cold agenda creep under the covers with them.

"Well? Are you going to open that or am I going to have to rip it out of your hands and do it myself?"

Will sighed. "I'll open it in my office. Come with me, if you like, since I'm sure you're going to anyway."

Once they had the office door closed behind them, Will ripped at the end of the envelope, and got out a thick fold of papers. Unfolded, the letter was at the top.

"I passed," Will said, reading the words again, and then again in case he'd misunderstood. "I passed! I've got the certificate and the… this is all photocopies of the terms and conditions," he put most of the paper down on his desk and then read the letter once more, holding it up to his face and gasping in disbelief.

"That's the stuff!" Jack slapped him on the back – acceptable, between Subs, Will remembered to remember, although honestly his instinctive reaction would always have been scowling – and reached out for the letter. Will handed it over.

"Passed the health assessment, no points of query, no action issues - that's brilliant, Will!" Jack was grinning from ear to ear. "With your research record, now, if you just manage to get through the interview stage without setting the room on fire it's all yours for the taking! Well done, my friend."

Will laughed a little, and waited to feel half as triumphant as Jack did. He sat on the edge of his desk and looked around his office, at the collected imprint of years of work and struggle

towards this goal, this goal now within his grasp.

He had a valid alignment health assessment certificate. He might never need another while he worked at the university. He could pursue whatever this thing was with Hannibal, in all its myriad confusion, and not have to document anything or be accountable to anyone. Everything had turned out so exactly right for all he needed.

All he had thought he needed.

All he had let himself be told he needed.

He sighed, and shifted to sit in his desk chair, and looked at the stack of papers arranged variously on his desk. He reached into the middle of one pile, and unerringly pulled out a folder.

“Jack,” he said slowly. “I need to talk to you about my work on the review of the Nurizon paper.”

“What?” Jack frowned. “Is this the thing Chilton came to me to complain about a few weeks back?”

“Probably. I suppose it’s too much to hope that he told you he’s launching an investigation into how they’re hiding data and endangering patients?”

Jack took a deep breath. “He said you had, quote, ‘some ridiculous ideas and a persecution complex’. I told him you hadn’t brought any problems about it to me and you had enough on your plate. And then you turned in your write-up and I assumed he’d made a mountain out of a molehill, heaven knows it wouldn’t have been the first time.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m bringing something to you now. Jack, we have to…”

“No.” Jack shook his head, holding up a hand. “No, we’re not doing this now. Come on, Will! You have literally had this promotion handed to you. This certificate? Is everything you’ve worked for. I bullied you, I admit, into getting a session Dom, and I know that didn’t work out for the best, but this is what it was all about and you passed! Are you going to throw all that away?”

“It’s not right that a private company should have so much power at this university that I could get my tenure turned down because I do something ethical!”

“It may not be right but it is the reality. And if I get involved it’ll be my head too, and then there’ll be no Subs left in this department with any influence and Chilton, Chilton will get to run things and you know what a fuck up that will be.”

Will let out a shaky breath and closed his eyes, slumping back in his chair.

“It’s not right, Jack.”

“Will. Do not let this ruin things for you. You can’t screw CETApharm and let them know it you did it. Do you understand me?”

Will blinked, looking up. He studied Jack’s face carefully.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Jack repeated slowly.

Will licked his lips. “Yeah. I think maybe I do.”

Jack nodded slowly. “Because, after all, deceptions have a way of getting found out, don’t they?”

He was talking about CETApharm, and Will knew that, but still couldn’t help a sudden cold twisting in his guts at where the words took him.

Seven

Chapter Notes

> Final Chapter! Thank you so much again to those who have been reading and commenting as I've been putting this up, it's so very lovely to get that feedback <3 I hope the end product is satisfactory *g*

It was late on Monday evening by the time Will drove back to his house from Langley.

Even after his last lecture of the day, and the meeting that followed, Will had gone back to his office and lingered, working through old files on his computer, re-reading email chains and scribbling notes, printing off what ended up as a thick sheaf of paper and annotating that as well.

All necessary, for what he had planned, but a convenient necessity, he would admit.

He needed it to be too late for him to even think of driving to Baltimore that night. He needed not to allow himself that option.

If he got back there, back into Hannibal's house and Hannibal's bed – either of Hannibal's beds - he didn't know when he'd manage to climb out again. The elation that persisted, that was flooding his brain with endorphins like he'd been strapped down to an opiate pump, made rational thought hard enough already – it was genuinely frightening, the effect on biochemistry of just… meeting someone. Having them look at you. Having yourself think they'd like to look again.

Was that euphoria from freedom? Because he'd transgressed the boundaries of alignment and let out a part of himself he'd thought he'd always have to push down?

Or did everyone – anyone - feel like this, if they could just find the right someone?

Sitting in his car, in his road, Will paused for a moment, making himself breathe. There were things he ought to do tonight and certainly for the first of them being flushed and partially aroused and unclear of his identity in his mind most distinctly would not help.

Rallying himself, he got out onto the pavement and then popped the trunk, getting out the box of documents he'd been gathering, staggering with it up the road to Beverley's house.

- - -

"It's a good weight of dead tree you've got there," Freddie said, rifling through the box Will had placed on Beverley's dining table quick as a squirrel, "but how much of this is actual verifiable evidence?"

"I've got the trial data as it was reported to me," Will pulled out the relevant plastic folder, the one he'd waved at Hedecker and Chilton what seemed like a lifetime ago. "And there's endless amounts on the trial data as they're publishing it – I wrote some notes highlighting the discrepancies, you can refer to that. Here," he passed over his half-filled notebook. "Sorry if my handwriting's a bit…" he waved his hand in the air, "there was a lot to cover."

"But you don't have any paper trail, or anything digital, on them telling you not to mention any of this in your write-up?"

Will shook his head. "But this is something, right? This is enough to ask a question?"

Freddie folded her arms and raised one eyebrow. "Hard to say without reading it through. I mean, my newspaper? They're prepared to go out on a limb but it's usually right far out, like Martians in the Senate far. This is some pretty gritty stuff – and pretty dull, to be honest, for the average reader. Half of them are convinced Big Pharma literally exists only to poison them as it is."

“How can you...?” Will looked over at Beverley, who was standing back, watching them. She hadn’t said anything since confirming at the door that Freddie was there to talk to, and he kept expecting her to chip in over Freddie’s attitude.

“How can you dismiss this?” Will continued anyway. “They’re going to wind up letting people suffer – die, maybe – just because they want a clean nose on this drug launch, when having the real data wouldn’t even jeopardize its reputation for anyone who can actually read what’s in front of them with half a brain!”

Freddie folded her arms and huffed. “I’m not saying I won’t look into it, Will, but you need to understand there’s more to this than just printing random assertions in the news and hoping someone cares. I need to figure out the angle, figure out how to sell it to my editor and figure out how to cover my ass and yours. Which, incidentally, you know how much easier this would have been if you’d decided to have a crisis of conscience *before* you wrote an article signing off on them?”

And Will could hear it in his head, welling up from his subconscious, the words he’d once had yelled at him at an academic seminar: Uppity Sub, what the fuck do you know about it?

He gripped the edges of the table and clenched his teeth, momentarily appalled at himself.

There was more he had to think through about his identity than just the freedom to inhabit it, clearly.

What was his anger at Freddie, after all, if not actually anger at himself?

“Yeah, I’m…” he nodded. “You’ve got a point, and I know it. I should have acted earlier but… it just didn’t happen. I’m trying to fix that now, though.” He looked up at her. “Please can I leave the stuff with you for now, so you can think some more about it?”

Freddie inclined her head for a moment in acknowledgement, then nodded.

“What is the risk of Will being exposed as the source, do you think?” Beverley said now, coming up to the table to join them. “I thought part of the point was that you couldn’t risk

pissing off these guys?"

Will sighed. "Yeah. Sure, they could probably get the university to deny me tenure. And I thought that mattered more than anything else – I thought it had to. But when I got within touching distance of it, I realized it wasn't worth the way some of the stuff I'd done to get there was making me feel about myself."

Freddie gave a short laugh. "Principles are very nice, and much easier to have when you've got an income." She stepped round the table to his side, looking about as friendly as Will had ever seen her. "But let's hope you don't get to discover that first hand." She smiled and gestured back at the box: "Basically, I can't guarantee anything, but I'll do my best. And I always protect my sources. I'll read over it all tonight and I'll be keeping in mind how to obscure the origin of anything I might – *might* – end up publishing."

"OK. Thank you." Will picked up his scarf and gloves from where he'd put them on the table. "I'll be waiting to hear, then."

He went towards the door.

Freddie followed him. "Listen, " she said, "just because my paper mostly writes about shit that doesn't affect anyone, doesn't mean I don't want to do something else. Thank you, for trusting me with this."

Will grinned at her, enjoying the small moment of connection, and reached for the door handle, then thought of something else, something which had been preying at the edges of his mind.

"Oh, by the way," he asked, "speaking of your writing – how did it go with that swi- that indeterminate teacher?"

"Not great," Freddie sighed, crossing her arms. "She got a new hearing on her suspension decision, but if they decide in her favor it'll be a fucking legal milestone. I've never heard the alignment health board overturn their own decision except when there, well, when there was a significant bribe involved."

“That’s not good.”

“No.” Freddie sighed. “It’s a fucking disgrace.”

“Language, Freddie!” Beverley called out, gently, and Freddie turned to nod slightly in reply, her frown relaxing into a soft smile for a few seconds.

It was a reassurance, Will could see. For them this Chastisement was essentially tender; a declaration of love.

Finally pushing out into the night and the cold air, he couldn’t help a thrill and a shiver that ran irresistibly down his body together.

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Back in his own house, Will spent half an hour reassuring the dogs he was equally ecstatic to see them too, and found a few small chores to keep him occupied a little while after that.

And then, too soon, he was sitting in his chair, phone cradled in his hands, thinking again.

He tried to imagine Hannibal Lecter in this room, with the dog hair and the old, yellowing newspapers in the magazine rack, and the ironing board he’d finally got set up and had never yet got round to putting away.

He tried to imagine himself at social gatherings, on Hannibal’s arm – presumably he still would be the Sub, at least outwardly, in this relationship? How else could they work it? How would they work that?

Sighing, he closed his eyes. Ridiculous, anyway, to think in terms of relationships and partnerships and plans, when they'd spent one night together and met on a grand total of five occasions.

Will had always thought a serious relationship would be nothing he wanted in life – oughtn't he to doubt himself for having such a change of heart?

Suddenly, his mobile rang as he held it, and Will read the caller ID and got it to his ear before the second ring had even finished.

"Hello? Hannibal?"

"Hello, Will." There was a smile in that tone, Will was sure. Maybe even a smirk, a little self-satisfied smugness.

Will liked the idea of that. Of Hannibal at home, maybe even still in bed, contented as a cat, sleek and languid and thinking about Will.

Will cleared his throat and adjusted his trousers. "Hi! What's up?"

"You intimated that I might ring if I chose."

"No! Yes! That's great!" Will sighed, ran a hand over his face and smacked himself lightly round the back of the head. "I'm really glad you called," he added, more slowly, letting the timbre of his voice drop and settling back in the chair. "I wanted you to call. I was hoping you would."

"You could have called me, if you wished to speak."

"You say that like you've never been nervous."

“Would it make you feel easier if I said I have often been nervous around you?”

Will bit his lip. “Wish I could see your face when you talk like that.”

“Like what? Telling the truth? Or reassuring you? Or is your fascination with the fact that I make myself vulnerable to you?”

“All three? I don’t… I’ve never even let myself imagine what it might be like to – to have someone let themselves be vulnerable for me.” Will thought about Hannibal trapped under him, how easily he’d taken it, and quivered again as the arousal ramped up, sharp, his blood thrumming in his skin.

“You like it?” Hannibal asked.

“Too much.”

“I’m not sure anything you do to me could be too much unless I believed it to be too much.”

“You like a debate, don’t you?”

“Among other things.”

Will bit his lip again. “God, I… How are you, anyway? That’s what I should be asking.”

“You mean since you so thoroughly undid me this morning?”

“How about we play a game where you don’t answer questions with a question?”

“What happens if I disobey?”

“Fuck, Hannibal…” He hadn’t thought about that yet, about *punishment.* He wanted to.

Doing things to Hannibal that were supposed to be mean, even cruel. Except that they would be things Hannibal wanted. Except not exactly, not really, not in the moment, not so much that Hannibal wouldn’t end up distressed and begging and… and then Will would take care of him, soothe him down so well and… and it could be so loving, Chastisement, when you wanted it to be; that reassurance that someone cared what you did, what happened to you.

Will clutched at the phone, pushing it harder against his ear like it could get his mouth any closer to Hannibal’s. “I’ll think of something to do to you, don’t you worry,” he said, having to swallow over the cracks in his voice.

Hannibal cleared his throat. When he spoke again his voice was lower. “I have been quite comfortable today, both mentally and physically, I assure you.”

Will frowned. That sounded decidedly… unexciting.

“Of course,” Hannibal continued, “when I say ‘comfortable’… my neck still burns with the force of your mark, and I have struggled to concentrate on the work I am supposed to be doing from home because I think of all the things I might say to you and what you might say – and *do* – in reply. But I am quite content with these circumstances and so I call them ‘comfortable’, I think not inaccurately.”

“You think not, do you? Fuck,” Will let out a long breath and bunched his free hand at his side because he was *not* going to start touching himself during this phone call without their discussing it first, that much control he would insist upon. “I’m rolling my eyes at you now,” he added, trying to keep his tone light, “in case you’re interested.”

“Always. And how are you?”

“I…” Will paused, wondering where to take this. He wanted – God did he want – to keep talking about what was happening between them, to dip down into that and forget everything else. To discuss with Hannibal his life and his job would bring Hannibal’s place in his world out of fantasy and into reality, and there were all kinds of ways that could mess them up.

When it came down to it, though, he did find himself wanting Hannibal’s opinion. Crazy to trust Hannibal after so short an acquaintance, and the part of Will that wanted to keep his mind private and secure screamed for him to backpedal and avoid the deeper intimacy.

But what might such an intimacy be like?

“Well, it’s been a long day,” Will said, slowly. “Even for one starting past noon.”

“You did arrive on time, in the end? You were rather frantic when you left my house, I think?”

“Yes and no. Or possibly no and yes. Yes was frantic, and no I wasn’t on time, I was basically late - but that wasn’t the problem.” Will took a heavy breath, closed his eyes for a moment and then went for it: “Do you remember me telling you, way back, about my involvement in a trial for a drug called Nurizon?”

“But of course,” Hannibal gave a soft, offended huff. “I was drawing you, on a couch in the apartment.” Hannibal sighed. “I remember that very well.”

Retreading those steps of their dance of those meetings would be worth doing sometime, Will thought, with another sizzle of feeling down his spine, but for now he kept on his decided path. “Well, I made a decision about it. And then, today, I rethought that decision.”

He explained, as succinctly as he could.

“Certainly complicated,” was Hannibal’s first remark, dry, and Will winced, because no, this would not be untidiness that Hannibal would want in his life.

“I’m going to everything to try and avoid letting them know I’m the whistleblower,” Will told him. “But, yes, to be honest this might be a bit worse than complicated. I’m not exactly…” He sighed. “Well, I told you, when we met, I mean, I’m not… I’m maybe not the most together person you’ve ever encountered.”

Hannibal’s answer came at once: “You, Will, are all that I am concerned that you be.”

“God, Hannibal, you can’t just *say* things like that, like…”

“Like what? Like the truth?”

“I want to kiss you,” Will said, indignant and accusing. “If I was standing next to you now I’d kiss you.”

“Then I wish rather fervently that you were here.”

Will ran a hand over his face. “Fuck, yes. Why aren’t I?” He shifted against the chair, his skin heating again and every piece of friction a tease, a taunt at how frustrated he was getting. No amount of personal space or mental calm seemed possibly worth the price of not being able to touch Hannibal Lecter right then and there.

“I’ll come over to you,” Will blurted out. “It’s not so late, I’ll just get in my car and…”

“It is past ten,” Hannibal said smoothly. “And you have a lecture tomorrow morning, as I recall, unless your schedule has changed?”

“No changes. You’re right - it’s just…” Will let out a long sigh and then shifted restlessly, the noise turning into a whine he was embarrassed to hear coming from himself, although he

thought he heard down the phone Hannibal's breath catching in response, which made him want to try making the sound again even as he blushed.

"I, on the other hand," Hannibal said, "start a night shift run tomorrow evening. So I could come to you, if that would be agreeable?"

Will froze. Suddenly all the heat in him turned down a notch. He looked quickly round his living room in case it had suddenly become tidy, tasteful or less obviously used by three dogs. None of that had happened.

The silence since Hannibal had spoken was dragging out. With each moment, a quick, obvious excuse would be harder to sell. Will frowned, trying to think.

"It is late," Hannibal was saying now, perfectly calmly. "I can quite understand if…"

"My house is a tip!" Will shouted. And then, breathing hard. "Um, yeah, this place is not… I kind of had this image that somehow the first time you saw it I would have… burned it to the ground and bought somewhere much cleaner with the insurance? I have three dogs and they will get hair on what you're wearing and I have no food in and all my coffee is instant, but… if that's not put you off forever?"

"I might not wear my cashmere," Hannibal said, so very deadpan that Will had no idea if it was a joke or quite a serious strategical decision.

"It will be late by the time I get to you," Hannibal added, and he sounded more human now, concerned. "Many would say that it is quite unreasonable to wish to see someone again so soon after parting when it will require so much effort." He sounded rather surprised, like it had just occurred to him and his own deviation bemused him.

"I'll be waiting," Will said, and then, letting the breathlessness out, "drive quickly." And that was a line from the movie of someone else's life if ever there was one, but damn if it didn't feel good to deliver, and from the little half-gasp on Hannibal's end of the line, not entirely ineffectual either.

- - -

Will left Hannibal in bed again on Tuesday morning.

They hadn't had much time or, quite honestly, much energy, when it came to it, the night before, Hannibal having clearly ignored speed limits all along the way but still drawing up outside Will's house only just before midnight. That said, Will would have stayed up a lot later just to see the look on Hannibal's face when Will Commanded him to get on his knees between Will's legs, as Will rested back once more in his armchair.

Hannibal had disclaimed any long-term previous relationships, but he'd clearly been with someone long enough to learn how to give head like it was going out of fashion, to use his mouth to crack someone wide open, and Will had soon been squirming and begging, helpless as he'd been with his legs hooked over Hannibal's shoulders, splayed and vulnerable at the mercy of Hannibal's mouth and hands.

Once he'd had his own orgasm, it was easier to concentrate on working Hannibal up, which Will had done in his bed – sheets put on fresh whilst Hannibal had made the drive - feeling strangely daring from just the intimacy of that. He'd tied Hannibal's hands loosely to each other – Will's bed being self-consciously bondage-point free – but Hannibal had been mostly keeping still on pure obedience as Will slowly explored his body, finally attempting something – it didn't really deserve the dignity of the name 'blow-job' – involving his mouth and Hannibal's cock, which Will thought at the time had to be terrible, but seemed to get Hannibal off pretty quickly once Will had twigged – and fuck if it hadn't almost got him hard again at once – that Hannibal had decided to *wait for Will's permission to come.*

Everything about having stayed up late seemed slightly less splendid when Will's alarm went after four hours of sleep and he had to dash out without even a coffee, instant or otherwise, but as the day went on he got back to the hazy wonderful of daze of it, and once he was back in house again Tuesday evening, he had to head almost straight away to the shower and get his hands on himself to try and work out the tension born of a whole day of shuddering reminiscences.

Having toweled off and got dressed again, Will wandered back into his living room, sat in the chair where he'd so recently received Hannibal's attentions, and gave a happy but frustrated

groan. Hannibal was now off into a five-day span of night shifts, ending on Saturday morning. Hannibal would need to sleep that day away, and then Sunday, when they might have met, he had a longstanding obligation to some sort of awards ceremony in Baltimore. With Will's schedule added in, it would be the weekend after before they could easily see each other again.

"I will spend my spare moments thinking of things to say to you," Hannibal had said when they'd discussed it, eyes dark with intent. "Can I hope you will think of me?"

"Why ask if you already know the answer?" Will had retorted, trying to give Hannibal a taste of his own questions game.

"Do you think I am so confident that I know?" Hannibal was smiling, but there had been a touch of something else in his expression that had made Will have to kiss him all over again.

"I have never felt this kind of uncertainty," Hannibal confessed when they broke for air. "It is most inconvenient."

"Is it?" Will had kissed him quickly, laughing.

"Most inconvenient indeed. What it is like with you is nothing whatsoever like anything that I could feel – could do for myself – alone. I find myself missing your scent, even in the sheets where you have slept"

Will shuddered again now just thinking about those words. He'd be coming up with things for when they were reunited, without doubt. The problem was likely to be getting round to doing anything else.

The doorbell rang. Although he knew Hannibal was currently either in a break room or an operating theatre somewhere in Baltimore Methodist, Will couldn't help the slight skip of his heart as he went to answer, the hope lasting right up until he actually saw Freddie standing there.

“Hey, Will.” She smiled. “We were wondering if you’d like to come over for dinner? I made goulash. I should warn you that acceptance will make you liable to be heavily interrogated by Beverley about whoever it was that apparently left your house today at two in the afternoon looking, I quote, ‘fucked sideways in the best way’. But on the other hand it’s good goulash.”

“Sure,” Will said, laughing, only realizing as they were actually on the verge of getting to Beverley’s that, as far as Beverley was concerned, even though she’d never knowingly seen Hannibal Lecter, she knew that that was the name of the guy who had left Will in a mess of a drop back in November.

He could prevaricate. But he was kind of hoping Hannibal would become a regular sight around his house – the dog hair hadn’t seemed to be deal-breaker – and lying now would only lead to trouble down the line.

“No, I promise,” he was soon protesting, over what was indeed delicious goulash, in the face of Beverley’s concerned expression, “I promise, it’s fine. It was all a misunderstanding, before.”

“How can you fail to understand you’ve dropped someone?” Freddie asked, frowning.

“We were both messed up,” Will told her. “We are both messed up. But… we suit. We’re kind of messed up in the same way.” He sighed. “He makes me feel, now… well, I’ve never felt like this before.”

Beverley gave a wry smile. “Yeah, I can pretty much tell that.” She reached out and squeezed his arm, quick and gentle. “Listen, I’m glad you told me about it. I’m glad you’re happy – if you’re happy I’m always going to be happy for you. Keep talking to me, OK? I’m always here.”

Will took a quick sharp breath and looked down into his bowl for a moment.

“When are you seeing each other again?” Freddie asked, and Will explained about the night shifts.

“Well, whilst lover boy’s leaving you with free time,” Freddie told him, “I think I’m figuring out a good line on your Nurizon case. I’ll tell you more after the we’ve eaten.”

- - -

At times during the next couple of days, Will just had to stop and laugh at himself. Like when he spent fifteen minutes in a lunch break totaling the remaining days, hours and minutes until he’d see Hannibal again, which had started as an idle bit of procrastination but which ended up as a pretty intense math exercise in base twelve.

He spoke to Jack a few times – the date of his further interviews for the tenured post had been set and Jack was ever ready with advice and hints. The topic of CETApharm did not come up.

Bella was doing better, Will was glad to learn – even up to company soon, Jack said, now the chemo was well over, and Will agreed to making a date to visit them sometime without even much internal reluctance. Bella had helped him, after all. He was still maybe a little scared of how much she’d understood about what lay behind that phone call – maybe more than he had, at the time. But she’d still helped, after all, and if she’d wanted to go telling Jack that his poster-boy tenured Sub wasn’t quite the most clearly defined in his alignment, she could have done so twenty times by now.

The weird thing was, he felt less angry about being taken as a Sub than he had in years, even though he had anything, now, to point to and base his feelings of difference on. He even found himself, when Jack was talking about wanting to get the details perfect for his and Bella’s first date night since the end of Chemo, mentioning the Submergé grooming parlor, and suggesting Jack check it out. There’d be nothing wrong with it, after all, if all that was something you actually liked and wanted.

When Saturday morning rolled around, Will found a text on his phone from the early hours of the morning, Hannibal coming off the end of his last night shift and sending a simple picture of the sunrise over Baltimore.

>*Whenever you’re next awake, call me*, Will sent back.

A distinctly filthy phone call ensued at five that evening, for which Will locked himself in his bedroom away from his dogs and made knee-trembling use of supplies he'd picked up with some embarrassment from a sex store in town during the week.

He was very definitely sure he had a prostate, now.

"I can't believe I'm waiting another six days and seventeen hours until you can do that to me in person," Will gasped out afterwards, laying back on his bed and wiping sticky fingers on tingling insides of his thighs, casting the vibrator aside to clean later.

Hannibal had tried Commanding him in the use of the toy over the phone, tentatively at first and then with growing conviction until they'd both been scarcely coherent. Perhaps Will demanding what to be told wasn't in the original spirit of tonal training, but the rush of pleasure hadn't felt any the less for it.

Now Hannibal made a pained noise, through his own panting breaths. "I cannot miss this ceremony," he said, sadly, a moment later. "But," he added with more energy, "you could come along as my companion? And we could leave as soon as my part is finished. And return to my house. And you do not have lectures on Monday mornings." There was a smile in his voice by the end, Will could tell.

"I'm really not good at parties," Will pointed out, at the same time imagining all the things they could do on Sunday night that would mean needing a lie-in on Monday.

"I would very much like to have you there, Will. It has been a long week without you, and I have missed you in many, many ways."

Will smiled to himself, curling up in a ball to keep that feeling close.

"OK then. Sure. Why not?"

- - -

Will was feeling distinctly uncomfortable and out of place at the Lifesaving Service Awards the next afternoon, until he saw Hannibal and saw Hannibal see him, which produced an expression it was hard to feel inadequate in the face of.

Hannibal kissed him, quickly, right there in public – their first touch in five days, and Will didn't find it at all hard to melt a little under it, Acceptance proclaimed in all his body.

"You look quite lovely," Hannibal said, softly.

Will leaned up and brought his lips close to Hannibal's ear. "You'd look better naked," he replied, and the let the thrill of it – of saying that, of wanting to, of having someone to whom to want to say it – rush through him.

Hannibal took his hand for a moment, pressing tightly.

"The speeches will commence shortly," Hannibal continued. "Let me show you the sad array passing for canapés meanwhile."

"Looks like it all cost about a hundred dollars per mouthful," Will pointed out, rolling his eyes.

In the end Will was sent to get glasses of wine, whilst Hannibal devoted his attention to assembling two plates of the least reprehensible food items. As Will was making his way back again, wine in hand, he saw that Hannibal had been approached by someone now talking to him, and hung back a little, shy of getting into conversation with a stranger.

Except – he realized when the man turned a little – the speaker was not a stranger to him at all.

Unsteady, suddenly feeling sick, Will stumbled forwards across the floor, still trying to balance the glasses.

"…nothing to worry about," Dr Bretton was saying to Hannibal, an oily smile plastered over his face. "Of course I ensured that he passed our board – and quickly too! That job should be a shoe-in for him now, at least as I understand it – very clever man, your Sub, Lecter."

Hannibal had drawn himself up and was perfectly expressionless in a way that boded not well at all; Will felt winded as if he'd been kicked in the stomach.

"I must beg your pardon," Bretton was still blathering on as Will helplessly approached them, "I had no idea that you were his Dom. If I had, well… I mean, things can be so easily misunderstood, can't they? I don't know what he's told you but, well, Subs can be so highly strung. Anyhow, as I say, I made sure he passed. Ah, Will!" he turned, smiling still. "I was just explaining…"

"Yes, you have explained most adequately," Hannibal said, voice tight, and he turned to put the plates he was holding back on the trestle table with a clatter. He shot a look at Will of quite extraordinary hurt.

Will needed to touch him, hold him, stroke him, make it right. He needed to soothe that pain away more than he needed to breathe, but he couldn't.

And it was all his fault.

"Hannibal!" he cried out anyway. "Please!"

But Hannibal was turning his back, moving away, every line of his body stiff and braced like he was expecting blows from every side.

"Hannibal!" Will called out, voice cracking, Pleading coursing through it without conscious effort.

Hannibal twisted on his heel and bristled at him. “Yes, you make a great show of your submission, do you not? By all means demonstrate again to an audience how prettily you beg and kneel! You had to show Bretton, and then you thought you’d do even better fooling me? I cannot bear to look at you. I let you…” he stopped, biting hard on his lip.

Will could feel his own tears welling up, mirroring in this as in all things.He couldn’t think what to do or say.

“I didn’t lie!” he murmured. “Not once, I didn’t... not about anything that mattered, I swear it!”

Hannibal snorted. “Words!” he spat out, contemptuous.

“But I’d do anything,” Will began, reaching out only to have Hannibal draw back from him, and that was hideous to endure.

He had to think, if only he could, in this nightmare.

His worst dream… except for a long time this hadn’t been his worst dream because his deepest fear had been something else, something that now seemed like nothing at all if only Hannibal would consent to be with him again.

And Will knew what he had to do.

He turned around, pacing rapidly back across the crowded room, causing heads to turn and gasps to echo through the crowd.

“Dr Bretton!” Will cried out, and his voice was all Command, all Demand, all Dominance.

More gasps now, and someone laughing awkwardly, perhaps expecting a punchline.

"Dr Bretton," Will continued. "Tell the people here what happened when you assessed me for my alignment health assessment."

"Will!" Someone called out from the side. It was Jack. Of course it was Jack, of course Jack would be here – and the rest of the university no doubt, yes, there was Chilton, bug-eyed with shock.

"Will! What the hell?" Jack turned to the crowd. "He's not feeling well, can we just give him some air, can we…"

"I am completely well," Will said firmly. "And I shouldn't need a health board to prove it for me, but I do, and when I had one what happened, Bretton?"

Will paused, aware that he was still half on the edge of breaking down. He had no idea if Hannibal had stayed to watch, but this was about more than that, even if without it he'd never have had the courage – the terrible empowerment of hopelessness - to begin.

"What happened, Bretton?" Will repeated, Dom in all his stances. He was the center of attention, the Commander of the room, people could see all that weird and wrong about him and it was everything he hated but he'd do it, if he had to.

Finally, nostrils twitching, Bretton burst into response. "I don't know what you're trying to imply, you're clearly distressed, Dr Graham, and…"

"You told me I had to let you slobber on me if I wanted to pass that assessment," Will said, loudly and clearly as he could. "You told me I had to let you take me to that parlor. You believed that I, as a Sub," – another gasp from their audience – "had no real choice but to do as you told me, that I had to put up with it – well it's no one's business what I am, and no one should have to put up with that!"

The room erupted. Bretton was still protesting, several people had their phones out, security were making their way over, and Will found himself grabbed by the arm and dragged from

his position in the center of the room.

"Will!" Jack was saying to him as they moved. "Are you insane? Just what did you expect all that to accomplish?"

Will looked at what had been left in his wake. The crowd was seething, but there was no sign of Hannibal.

He sighed and mashed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"Quite possibly nothing."

- - -

"You might as well nail a notice of your demands to the faculty door at this point," Jack said slowly.

They were sitting on a wide, wall-mounted pipe in a service corridor at the awards venue, in cold air and under fluorescent strip lighting, with a distinct smell of old cooked dinners. Jack had somehow lifted a bottle of wine from the buffet before their exit and now they shared it in little conical paper cups from the male Sub's bathroom.

"Because," Jack continued, "you are never passing any sort of health exam ever again after that. For heaven's sake, Will, you'll be lucky if you still have a job by the end of the week. Listen, OK, I understand why you had to get that out there, what you said, but why then? Why like that?"

Will frowned at him. "You mean pretending to Dom?"

"You weren't pretending." Jack gave a short laugh. "I should know. I'm actually a Sub."

“And I’m not? So you’re not so keen any more for me to get the position you wanted another Sub to have?’

Jack sighed. “I’m sorry if it came across that way. To have you in that post and have it be a matter of record, therefore, that a Sub held it? Sure that would have had its uses. But you’re a good person and a good teacher and the right person for that job – that’s why I wanted you for it. I don’t care how you define.”

“I don’t know what I am,” Will confessed. He took another sip of wine and slumped back against the wall. “All I know is that he sees me, and whatever he sees? I want to be that.”

“So this was all about him? Lecter? You’re back with him now, despite what happened?”

Will frowned at him, confused. “What? How do you know about that?”

“Yeah, so I got this call,” Jack got out his phone and scrolled back through the logs with his thumb. “On November 10th. From Hannibal Lecter, who got my number, I admit, when I called him about you before you guys met the first time. But I think he told you about that?”

Will nodded. His mouth had gone dry.

“So Lecter called me, in quite the state, and wanted to know if you were at work and if you were OK. I told him you’d called in sick. He made me go and speak to the person who spoke to you to check you’d sounded basically alright. Now you can imagine I threatened him that if he’d hurt you in any way… But he just asked me – begged me, to be honest – to let him know how you were and when you did get back in. I don’t think I got the whole story out of him, but whatever it was, if you can forgive him I guess I ought to try to. And maybe also myself, for ever introducing you in the first place.” Jack put his phone away with a sigh.

Will looked at his hands. “I thought I was back with him. I don’t know, now, though… This was about me, tonight, what happened, but it was about him too, I ... Me with him, I…” Will

hung his head. “I messed up with him, but it wasn’t entirely my fault. The system sucks, you know?”

“When you do come to dinner,” Jack said, “and I’m still holding you to that, by the way, you need to talk to Bella about her new initiative – you know she works for the UN? They’ve got a group trying to get this health exam stuff repealed, internationally, for good. As I understand it they’re looking for people, good people, to work with.”

Will widened his eyes, and then nodded slowly, and reached out to let Jack pour him more wine.

- - -

Will got back to Virginia in a cab, after the wine. He paid and climbed out into the street with a heavy heart. Jack had stayed behind at the party, promising to attempt some last-minute damage control, together with muttered imprecations regarding what he might do to Bretton if he saw him again, and Will appreciated it, but not half as much as he would have done even one word from Hannibal.

Hannibal, who hadn’t abandoned him after all, at least not until Will had pushed him away for good.

Will sighed and made his way along to his house, thinking vaguely that living with dogs was nice, but it was a shame they couldn’t put a light on to wait for you when you got home.

He fed them, and went to the sink, running himself a glass of water that he pressed against his forehead. At some point in all his time with Hannibal he’d stopped having tension headaches, and he couldn’t even remember when.

He wasn’t really drunk, for all he’d decided against driving. He felt tired and more than a little nauseous.

From the living room, his phone rang. He couldn't help rushing to get to it, and unlocking it with hands that shook a little, heart leaping.

But it was only Beverley.

"Hello?" he said, wearily. "This isn't really the best time."

"So I've got a dude in my front room," Beverley told him, "who I fished from your porch where he apparently was set on waiting, outside, in the snow, until you got back. He won't tell me what's happened, but do you want to see him or not? Because I can kick his ass back to Baltimore if you need me to."

Will blinked for a moment, staring into space, eyes wide.

Then he dropped his phone on the floor and ran to his front door, opening it and dashing out down the street to Beverley's. Her door wasn't locked and he crashed through until he was standing in her front room, looking down at Hannibal seated slightly sheepishly on Beverley's couch, a mug in one of his hand with the slogan: *Forensic Scientists Do It Microscopically.*

As Will came all the way in, Hannibal put the mug down and stood up, a look of determination and alarm on his face.

"Will," he began.

"I am sorry," Will said, unable to stop himself, pushing all he had into his voice, desperate. "I'm so, so sorry. I did turn to you that night because I saw the effect you had on Bretton, that is true, but I stopped thinking about any of that by the next time I saw you because…" he wrung his hands, he couldn't get the words out quickly or well enough and this might be his last chance. "The only good thing Bretton did for me was making me end up seeing you again. Even given all the other crap he pulled, for that I'd thank him."

Hannibal took an unsteady breath. “And what has happened now? After what you said at the awards? What happens with your health review, with your job?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll care in time but I don’t just now, if you’re willing to speak to me nothing else matters.”

They stared at each other.

“You were so beautiful, back there, in your Dominance,” Hannibal said now, softly.

“Whatever I was, it was how you made me. How you helped me to become,” Will whispered, walking closer, and held out his hand.

Hannibal stepped into his embrace.

“Just so you guys know,” came Beverley’s voice, slightly distant, “I’m not going to pretend I need something in this cupboard all that much longer.”

Will pulled back, grinning and sniffing a little. “Come to mine, Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal offered back a watery grin. “Order me and see.”

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EPILOGUE

- - -

They were curled round each other in Will's bed, entwined and inter-tangled, both panting a little, still.

Will carded his fingers through the hair on Hannibal's chest and sighed, then idly leaned in to suckle at a nipple.

Hannibal groaned.

"Still sensitive?"

"Yes. But that was not a request that you stop."

Will chuckled and lifted his head for a kiss.

They had talked, a little, about the events of the night and what had gone before. There was probably a lot of talking in their near future, Will thought, with so much to work through on both sides, but talking, with Hannibal, was nothing like a chore. It could feel effortless, almost unthinking, like playing in the shorelines of each other's minds, and then it could feel intimate, like the deepest caress permitted to no one else.

Will shivered, and broke the kiss with an effort before he got too involved in trying for another round.

"We ought to get up soon," he said. "We need to eat. The dogs need their evening walk. I have to prepare a statement for the university – Jack thinks I might still be in with a chance for tenure, if I'm prepared to fight my case, but it'll take a lot of paperwork. And you," he kissed Hannibal's nose, "still need to catch up on a week of broken sleep rhythms."

"Very well," Hannibal conceded, and stroked his hand down Will's back, drawing him closer. "But stay with me a little longer yet?"

“Never going to leave you,” Will told him, earnestly, with everything he had. And it might have been Command and it might have been Acceptance, or Pleading or Commendation or even Acknowledgement, he didn’t really notice – only that it made Hannibal smile back at him like he was exactly perfect already.

- - -

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